

A Season for Scandal

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Cover photo by Period Images

Cover designed by Eris Adderly

Edited by Personal Touch Editing

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Prologue

Josie

“You need to be careful. Elijah is watching you.” Evie’s expression was serious, but Josie waved her off. The past few years, Josie had spent far more time around Evie’s cousins than she had.

Their households were neighbors in the country, and Evie’s eldest cousin, Elijah, had been the bane of her existence growing up. Even more so once Evie had joined her uncle’s household and become her friend. Almost ten years older than her and Evie, he was a veritable stuffed-shirt and had spent his life disapproving of Josie’s ‘wild ways.’ He was also almost insufferably handsome, but Josie far preferred the middle Stuart brother, Joseph. She had been in love with him ever since she was old enough to know what love was.

“Elijah is so wrapped up in himself, he only notices I exist when I annoy him.” Though, to be fair, she did manage to do that on a fairly frequent basis. He’d never had much patience for Josie when she was a child and had even less now that she was a young woman and a debutante. “He thinks I am a ninny without a thought in my head for anything other than fashion and gossip.” A perception she encouraged. She did enjoy both past times, but enjoying them did not make her a ninny.

Evie slanted her a look, the flash in her dark eyes the only sign of her annoyance. Even when she was dressed as a maid rather than a lady, she managed to intimidate with a mere look. Out of their steadfast group of four best friends, Josie and Evie clashed the most often, both strong-willed young ladies, but they also loved each other fiercely. When they were in agreement, their other two friends, Mary and Lily, almost always fell into line, but when they were not, the arguments could be spectacular.

As they'd grown older, both of them had learned to compromise more often, which had mellowed their relationship considerably.

Shaking her head, Evie sighed.

"He knows we have been trying to find the traitor—" Evie's voice cut off, and they fell silent as footsteps approached the nook in the bookstore where they had met. Since their friend Mary had been kidnapped, uncovering one traitor to the Crown but not the mastermind behind a plot to assassinate the Duke of York, they had not been able to meet in Hyde Park as they once had.

Elijah was the eldest son of England's spymaster and a stodgy bore about proprieties. Like his father, he did not think spying to be an appropriate enterprise for a lady, which was why Evie was in hiding from them. She was determined to prove them wrong and had enlisted Josie and their friends Mary and Lily to help her after the attempted assassination of the Duke of York.

London was rife with intrigue at the best of times, but this Season was proving to be especially fraught. With a delegation from France and another from Russia, as well as turncoats among the *ton*, it felt as though a dark force was gathering. Josie shivered. She rarely feared anything, but when Mary had been kidnapped a week ago, she had known true terror for the first time in her life. What had seemed like a lark was no longer so exciting. Thankfully, Evie had been able to rescue Mary, but it had been a stark reminder of the stakes at hand.

Fear tingled up her spine as she and Evie waited for the footsteps to fade away. Whoever was walking through the store

was moving on their way. Josie let out a sigh of relief, waving her hand in front of her face. The weather was becoming quite warm as the Season drew to a close. Soon, the ton would be vacating London and heading to their estates and house parties for the summer. Surely, that would mean an end to the danger... she hoped.

“You are the one he sees the most,” Evie finished in a whisper, her eyes still alert, head tilted as though she was listening for any sign of nearby movement.

“Because *you* told me to watch him, your uncle, and other cousins.” A task that had not been a hardship at first. Not until recently, when Joseph began courting Miss Priscilla Bliss. The ballrooms of London were already buzzing with anticipation of an engagement announcement.

The very thought made Josie’s stomach twist with jealousy and anger.

She continued to visit Stuart House regularly, using their neighboring estates in Derbyshire and the long friendship between their families as her excuse. They were used to her presence in the Stuart Household. Even though, following her rescue, Mary had revealed how much the other ladies had been involved in looking for the traitor to Evie’s uncle, he did not look askance at Josie’s visits. She had been very careful not to be caught eavesdropping, not that she had learned much of interest. Lord Camden and Elijah spent most of their time worrying over Evie’s disappearance.

As far as Josie could tell, Joseph and Adam, the youngest, were not involved in the ‘family business’ and did not know Evie was not traveling as she was supposed to be. Elijah, on the other hand, seemed poised to eventually become his father’s successor.

“Considering how little you have learned from them, maybe we should focus your efforts in other directions,” Evie said thoughtfully, her eye unfocused as she thought.

Emotions assailed Josie. Self-recrimination—she didn’t like feeling as though she had failed at a task. Relief, she would no

longer have to listen to Joseph wax eloquent about the insipid Miss Bliss' 'charms.' Unhappiness, she would no longer have a good excuse to torment herself with Joseph's company. A bit of indignation, Evie felt she had not learned much, despite the truth to the statement.

It was hardly her fault that Evie's uncle and cousin were so distraught over her disappearance, they hardly spoke of anything else when Josie was around.

"I need to go, but I will think about this." Evie reached out and hugged Josie tight, washing away Josie's indignation. After all, Evie had not had to ask for Josie's help. Despite what had happened to Mary, Josie was very grateful for something to focus on this season other than making a match for marriage—especially as her chosen groom was mooning over someone else. If Evie wanted her to change her focus, then she would.

"Be careful," Josie whispered. Evie was working as a servant in the Greywood household, but Josie was sure she was doing far more dangerous forays in whatever free time she had. Lady Greywood was a fairly lenient employer, which was why Evie had chosen her. The drab clothing she wore did not entirely hide her stunning beauty, though Evie had done something with soot and cream to make her appearance less appealing.

"Of course."

Evie's confident tone didn't mitigate Josie's concerns. Sighing, she watched her friend scurry off, her posture changing from that of a confident lady to a meek and mild servant girl. Josie slowly counted to twenty in her head. Only then did she meander her way through the little corner of the bookshop, fetching her maid from the front, before making her way out to the street.

END

Elijah

A servant girl exited the shop, head down and hurrying along

the street. She kept her gaze on the large stack of books in her arms as if she was afraid of dropping them. Likely she had a bookish master to please. He moved his attention back to the door of the shop.

“Josie has been in there for far too long.” Bloody hell. He knew he should have followed her in.

“How long is too long in a bookshop?” his brother Joseph asked, amused.

“She’s a debutante, not a scholar,” Mitchell sneered. It took all of Elijah’s willpower not to snap at the man. He did not like Julian Mitchell—as far as he could tell, there were very few people who did. Secretary to a powerful lord, he’d abused his position more than once, forcing his attentions on maids and other members of the lower class. Working with him was almost an insult. But the man was very good at information gathering and had made himself a valuable resource to Elijah’s father.

Josie might be a debutante, but she was far smarter than Mitchell was giving her credit for. However, she really was not the type to frequent bookshops for long periods of time. She read the little romances currently all the rage, none of which took very long to find.

They had been walking down the street when Elijah saw her duck into the bookshop after a furtive glance over her shoulder. Instinct had made him stop and command the other two to wait with him to see what Josie was up to. Of all the adjectives he might use to describe Josie, ‘furtive’ was not one of them.

She was always brazen, flashy even, not only used to being the center of attention but demanding it, which always set him on edge. As a friend of his cousin and the daughter of his neighbor, he had always been protective, as he had of Evie’s circle of friends. It was Evie and Josie who gave him the most fits, though. Both were fearless and often got themselves into scrapes that Lily and Mary had been wise enough to stay out of.

He was still shocked Evie had managed to recruit the quieter

two to her cause, but at least Mary should be well under the thumb of her new husband now. Rex—the moniker he used among his friends rather than his title—was not the type to brook any nonsense. After the scare he had when she was kidnapped, Elijah did not think Rex would tolerate her playing at being a spy. Lily was the least likely out of the four to get into trouble, but Josie... well, for all that she was playing the socialite, she was the most likely cause of trouble. He couldn't find Evie, so he was paying especially close attention to Josie.

When she appeared in the doorway of the shop, he tensed. She glanced around the street, looking every inch the debutante in a delicate muslin dress, the cornflower blue color matching her eyes, her blonde curls tucked under her bonnet. Despite how pretty the dress was, he could not remember her ever looking so demure, which roused his suspicions even more. She was unaccompanied except for her maid, but she did not have a single book in hand. So, what had she been doing for so long in there?

“Joseph, catch up with her. She is most likely to talk to you.” The chit was head over heels for his little brother, which grated on Elijah as Joseph moved closer and closer to proposing to Miss Bliss, but he was not beyond using it. Despite Josie's exceptional beauty and wit, he did not think she would be able to sway Joseph's affections—still, it irritated him to watch her try.

While Elijah would have liked to question her, the two of them never got on well. She thought he was too bossy, and he thought she was too rebellious. Besides, he wanted to see if whoever she was meeting was still in the shop... or perhaps she had been passing notes?

Sighing, Joseph trotted off down the street after Josie.

“Do you think he will be able to better question her?” Mitchell asked, watching Joseph go, a hint of confusion in his voice.

“Josie has been in love with him since forever, even though he refuses to see it.” Elijah jerked his attention away from Josie's gently swaying skirts and waved his hand at Mitchell to follow him

across the street to the bookshop. "Whereas, she has never been fond of me. She will answer him far more readily. Come on. I want to find out what she was doing in there."

Mitchell snorted but came along without protest, even though he had stated his opinion of the young ladies many times. He thought they were not worth bothering with, even though they were poking their noses into dangerous places—a trio of debutantes could hardly learn anything of value. However, he did not know them, and he certainly knew nothing about Evie.

Though Elijah was inclined to agree with him in general when it came to Evie. He had learned long ago his cousin would not be the usual 'young lady' of the *ton*.

An hour later, Elijah had no more information than when he started. The bookseller said she had stayed in the back of the store, even pointed out the aisle she had gone down, but there was nothing and no one there other than the bookseller himself. He vowed he had not said more than two words to the young lady, and her maid had sat at the front the entire time.

The only other person who had been in the store had been a servant girl... The very same one he had seen leaving the shop and summarily dismissed as unimportant.

No... surely not.

Cursing himself under his breath, Elijah stalked away from the store, Mitchell hurrying after him.

Evie. It had to be Evie. Josie had been meeting with her, and he had let them get away. He needed to catch up to Joseph and find out what his brother had been able to learn.

Chapter 1

Josie

Staring down at the note in her hand, Josie did her best not to gasp. An unknown man had just delivered it. He had done no more than flash a smile when he handed her the note, then disappeared into the crowd, leaving her bewildered—even more so when she opened the note and read it. Her heart was now pounding so rapidly inside her chest, she thought it might burst.

Dearest Josie,

I have made a terrible mistake. Please come meet me in the garden immediately. I need your help.

Yours,

Joseph Stuart

Exactly what the mistake was, was unclear. Had Joseph finally come to his senses and realized his rumored upcoming engagement to Miss Priscilla Bliss was a horrible decision? He had been dancing attendance on the young woman for weeks now, completely enamored to all appearances.

Josie chewed on her lower lip. So far, her first season in London had been painful, watching the man she had loved for the past five years fall in love with someone else. What if he was not truly in love with Miss Bliss?

What if he had finally realized he should not be marrying her

but did not know how to gracefully step back?

Yours.

He had signed it *Yours*.

Did that possibly indicate Joseph finally returned her affections? At the very least, he had never signed a note in such a manner that she knew of, and she had grown up next door to him.

“Miss Pennyworth? Is it bad news?” Baron Stillwell’s concerned voice penetrated Josie’s racing thoughts.

She looked up at him with a brilliant smile, which she then bestowed on the rest of her circle of suitors. There were quite a few of them. She had been collecting them all Season, but unfortunately, not one of them had managed to distract her steadfast heart from the young man who had stolen her heart without even realizing it.

“No, no, but please excuse me. I must find my mother.” The resulting sighs of resigned dissatisfaction were gratifying. Though she did not particularly want to marry any of them—much to her mother’s frustration—Josie did appreciate their devotion. She was quite a catch—declared a Diamond of the First Water and an Original in her first Season, an ample dowry, granddaughter of a Marquess, and one of the best friends of the newly married Marchioness of Hartford.

Cynically, she knew it was her social connections more than her personality that drew her suitors, but they seemed to appreciate her quick wit and sunny nature. At least she had a personality, which was more than Miss Bliss could claim. Everyone agreed she was sweet but dull—everyone except Joseph.

Grinding her teeth as she made her way through the crush of people, fingers still clutched around the note, she looked for her friends, Mary or Lily, hoping one or both would be available to come with her. Unfortunately, she did not see Mary, or more to the point, Mary’s very tall husband anywhere. As petite as Mary was, she would be impossible to find in such a crowd. Lily was marginally easier, as she and Josie were both a touch above

average height for women, but Josie did not see her, either.

Well, blast.

She could not ignore the note. Joseph needed her to save him from a life of boredom with Miss Bliss.

Settling a demure smile on her face, she moved toward the doors to the gardens. Going out there alone was unwise for a debutante, but she doubted she would be long, and Joseph would be able to vouch for her.

Someone jostled her, and Josie turned to snap at him when he grabbed the hand holding Joseph's note and lifted it to his lips.

"Such beauty, unparalleled..." His voice trailed from the terrible attempt at poetry, and he blinked drunkenly, trying to remember what he was saying. Josie had never seen him before, and she quickly snatched her hand away.

"We have not been introduced, my lord." She hurried off, her nose in the air and her heart pounding. What a cad, approaching her like that!

Quickening her step toward the doors, she did not notice she no longer held the note in her hand.

END

Elijah

Now where the devil was Josie off to? Swanning through the ballroom, nose in the air, she did not even seem to notice how gentlemen's eyes followed her through the room. His lips pressed together with a wave of disapproval. While he knew it was expected of a debutante to draw the attention of marriage-minded gentlemen, seeing her made him even less enamored of the process.

She was the belle of the ball, garbed in a stunning pale blue gown that emphasized her bosom to the point of daring for a debutante and her blonde curls delicately piled into an elaborate array, pinned with winking sapphires. The same gem glittered at

her throat and ears, bringing an extra sparkle to her already bright eyes.

That was what the gentlemen of London saw. None of them knew what an unmitigated hoyden she was, the way she could race a horse, or the fact that she wore breeches when in the country. They only saw the Diamond of the First Water, the acknowledged beauty of the Season, and the demure lady looking for a likely match.

Likely whoever married her would disapprove of the other side.

For all she drove Elijah mad when they were in the country, and he was there to witness her exploits, he hated the idea of a stern husband denying her a part of herself. Which she was likely to get, as everything about the Season was set up to deceive a man into marriage with a woman he did not actually know. Though he wished his brother Joseph every bit of happiness with Miss Bliss, he wondered what secrets about the woman his brother did not know.

There would always be something.

He hoped his brother would find marital bliss since Elijah was depending on either Joseph or Adam to birth his heir. He did not intend to marry. The number of miserable couples among the *ton* had long ago convinced him that such a union was not for him.

Seducing the bored, unhappy wives of the *ton*—usually not difficult—was a time-honored pastime for rakes, Elijah included. Now, as part of the Society of Sin, an exclusive club for certain like-minded individuals within society, he saw even more married lords and ladies living their own lives. The point of marriage seemed to be to produce an heir, and Elijah had brothers to fulfill that duty for him. Though there were a few happy unions around, it seemed like quite a gamble to make, and Elijah never bet anything he could not afford to lose.

Which was why the idea of Josie married to some jackanapes who would not appreciate her vexed him, but there was nothing he could do about it. She was a young miss, and she wanted to be

married. As long as she left his brother alone, it was not his business.

However, finding his cousin Evie was his business, and Josie had received a note before leaving her circle of suitors.

Watching from his point on the balcony, Elijah frowned when Josie made her way to the doors to the gardens—then walked out alone! Bloody hell. Was she trying to have her reputation ruined? Quite a few curious looks followed her out the door. Sometimes, he swore Josie did not have a lick of common sense.

Unless... perhaps the note was from Evie, and she needed Josie. That was the only reason Elijah could think Josie might drop everything and rush out.

Pressing his lips together, he hurried down the hall to the stairs, following her out. If his cousin was in the gardens, he was going to catch her and drag her back to his father, even if he had to throw her over his shoulder.

Josie

Hurrying away from the drunk lord, Josie's heart was pounding when she stepped outside. The night air was cool on her cheeks, refreshing after the heat of the ballroom, and she sighed with relief. It was a crush inside.

Glancing around the patio, she saw several couples and small groups milling about on the stones, but no Joseph. Moving to the top of the three steps that led down into the gardens, she saw a dark figure on a path to the right. Thanks to the large hedges, he was completely in shadow and would be invisible to those on the patio. It was impossible to see his features, but he was the same size as Joseph, and when she looked at him, he raised his hand in greeting, gesturing her to join him.

"Bloody hell," she muttered under her breath, lifting her skirts to descend the few steps to the garden path. Joseph was lucky she

loved him as she did. Otherwise, she would turn around and march back inside.

Aware she was risking her reputation by disappearing into the hedges, she walked toward him, only to curse when he nodded in approval—and moved down another path! Her temper grew when she came to where he had originally stood and turned right to follow him.

“This had better be important,” she said waspishly as she walked into the grotto where he stood under a tree.

Stepping out from underneath the branches, the moonlight now on his face, the stranger grinned at her. The smile on his face was not pleasant. It was cruel. Malicious. Josie’s breath caught in her throat, her thoughts racing, sifting through her options in less than a second.

Scream.

Do not scream. You will be ruined.

You are already ruined. Scream, so you are not harmed.

Even if they only think he ruined you, you will be forced to marry him.

I do not want to marry a total stranger who set a trap for me.

“It is,” he said, his voice deep and threatening.

Josie stepped back, then whirled to run, but he was faster. If she had been in breeches, she might have stood a chance, but her skirts hampered her movements as they swished around her, and he caught her arm in a cruel grip. She cried out, though not loudly, as she was hauled back against him. Harsh fingers gripped her breast, sending a shocking pain through her as he dug into the soft flesh. No man had ever touched her like this, so intimately, so callously, but she had not forgotten everything Evie had taught her.

Josie, tall for a woman, threw her head back, hitting him on the chin with the back of her skull. Pain exploded in her head, but she hurt him as well. A small surge of victory rushed through her when he cursed, and his grip on her breast loosened. Twisting, she tore

herself out of his grasp, turning and striking. He dodged the blow aimed at his face. *Blast*. She was out of practice—that should have landed.

“Bitch.” He snarled, grabbing the front of her dress and yanking.

This time, Josie shrieked, unable to stop herself as the fabric tore with a loud ripping sound. She felt the cool night air on her chest all the way down to her stomach. She gasped, choking back a sob, barely aware of the tears on her cheek as she tried to cover herself.

Someone rushed by her, barreling into the man who had assaulted her. There was a flurry of fists, moonlight on dark hair... Josie blinked the tears away.

There was a shout behind her, back toward the patio, and the two men broke apart. She could finally see her rescuer.

“Elijah?” she whispered, almost unable to believe what she was seeing. Elijah was her hero?

The villain ran off into the darkness of the gardens, and for a moment, Elijah looked to follow him, but Josie whimpered, and he paused. The shouts behind her were growing louder.

Eyes falling to where Josie was clutching the tattered fabric of her dress, trying to cover her breasts, Elijah cursed. He shrugged off his jacket and wrapped it around her. Angry, dark eyes blazed as he glared down at her, mere inches from her tear-stained face. Despite the anger in his eyes, she was not afraid. Elijah was here when she was in trouble, the same way he had always been her entire life, getting her and Evie out of scrapes.

She was in far more dire straits than any childhood trouble, but she trusted him to take care of it.

“Not one word,” he whispered fiercely, tension vibrating through every line of his body. “Do not say one word. I will do the talking.”

She did not have a chance to respond before there was a loud chorus of gasps behind her.

Chapter 2

Elijah

Anger thrummed through his veins as he lifted his gaze away from Josie's shocked countenance and tear-filled blue eyes. His pulse pounding in his ears, his body screamed for action rather than standing here and doing nothing. He should be chasing down the villain who had attempted to ravish her. He should be shaking her for being so stupid to come out to the gardens, in the darkness, alone. Or, better yet, turning her over his knee.

Unfortunately, that thought reminded him of the flash of pale skin and creamy curves encased in her corset he'd glimpsed, and it sickened him. Not that she was grotesque, but he knew she would have never willingly chosen to display herself so blatantly to him. Yet he could not forget what he had seen, which made him feel as much a blackguard as the man who had assailed her.

There was no time for self-recrimination, though.

The gossips were already upon them. Somehow, he had to save both Josie's reputation and himself... and he did not know if the latter would be possible if he managed the former.

His mind raced as he met the stunned expressions of five members of the *ton*, including Lord Jarret, who despised Elijah's father. *His* expression shifted to savage glee when he met Elijah's gaze, realizing the position that Elijah was in.

“Lord Stuart, how could you?!” The woman in the lead, Lady Carmichael, pressed her hand over her heart, fan already fluttering. She made no move to help Josie, though. Despite accusing Elijah of the attempted rape, her eyes were lit with the juicy tidbit of gossip.

Despite his association with the Society of Sin, which was utterly secret, Elijah had maintained a spotless reputation, as had his brothers, for years. Some had called him priggish or even uptight, but it had not bothered him. The reputation had served him well, allowing him to be overlooked in situations where he needed to go unnoticed.

“He did not. He saved me!” Josie’s outburst, well-intentioned though it was, made him want to shake her again. What part of ‘do not speak’ had she not understood?

“Hush,” he said, glancing down at her. She gripped the jacket more firmly around her, keeping her gaze stubbornly averted. If she were his... The thought of spanking Josie into good behavior was not a new one, but given the circumstances and his glimpse of her nudity, it had taken on a very different, a very distracting one, and distractions were the last thing he needed.

“She is right.” A shrill voice behind them, one which Elijah recognized, made him blink. What the hell? The Countess of Hachet—a waspish viper who had terrified the marriage mart as Miss Winifred Belmont before her marriage earlier this year—shouldered her way through the small crowd with a sneer. While she was a beauty in face and figure, her personality was poisonous. She held up a small slip of paper as she took center stage. “His brother is the one who summoned her here. He must be covering for him.”

“What?” Lady Carmichael gasped, echoing Elijah’s thoughts before snatching the paper from the countess’ fingers, causing Lady Perth to look disgruntled for a moment before she smoothed her skirts and threw her shoulders back haughtily.

“My letter!” Josie surged forward, forcing Elijah to catch her

about the waist as her hand came up, spreading open the jacket she was holding closed about her. Several gasps from the little group that had found them let him know he was not entirely successful in preserving her modesty.

“What letter?” he growled in her ear, taking advantage of the momentary distraction while the others gathered around Lady Carmichael to see it.

“The one your brother sent me,” she whispered. “Did you really think I came out for no reason?”

“No, I thought you might be meeting Evie. Why on earth would my brother send you a letter?”

“Maybe because he finally realized he is about to make the biggest mistake of his life,” Josie shot back, jerking away from him and tightening his jacket around herself. She averted her gaze again, and he could not tell if it was because she was ashamed to look at him, angry with him, or hiding tears. Out of the three, he thought he might prefer the anger.

Jaw clenched against snapping back at her, he had an inkling of what she was talking about. He stepped away from her and quickly closed the distance between him and Lady Carmichael, snatching the letter from her hands. Lord Jarrett laughed, a sharp sound that dug into Elijah’s temper. It did not matter the dimness of the moon. There was enough light to see and recognize his brother’s handwriting.

Josie

“Oh, my stars... oh my word... what are we to do?” Josie’s mother moaned from her position on the fainting couch in their drawing room. A beauty in her own right, she managed to look stunning, even as she wailed.

After Elijah had taken the letter, things had moved remarkably quick. He had sent away the little crowd with admonishments not

to gossip and asked Lady Carmichael to retrieve Josie's parents. Though Josie did not wish to be beholden to any of those gossips, Lady Carmichael had been the least objectionable. Josie had been relieved to see her parents, at least until they got home, and her mother had decided to have vapors. Though, for once, Josie could not argue that her mother was overstating the direness of her situation.

For the first time in her life, she was completely frozen and did not know what to do. She was still huddled under Elijah's jacket, clutching it around her, with the tattered remains of her bodice beneath.

I am ruined.

She very much doubted there was any holding back the tide of gossip. She was ruined. Unmarriageable. Actually, that did not sound so bad, but everything that came with it... She would be shunned by polite society, as would her parents. She would have that guilt to go with everything else. She would forever be at the mercy of her father's direction, then his heir's, a distant cousin she had never met. Likely, her friends would never be able to speak to her again. Perhaps Mary, since she was married, if her husband Rex was amenable... but certainly not Lily until after she was married, not without risking her own reputation by consorting with a fallen woman, and only after her marriage if her husband was agreeable.

All because Josie had been so hopeful Joseph would turn away from Miss Bliss and to her instead. A hope that had been in vain. She did not know how someone had so perfectly mimicked Joseph's handwriting, but she no longer believed the note was from him. Why someone had sent it to her, she did not know... but she supposed it did not matter.

"I shall never be able to show my face in public again..."

Josie bit her tongue. She wanted to tell her mother, it was only her own life she'd ruined, but she knew that was not the truth. The *ton* was vicious. Her fall would affect both of her parents and any

of her friends and family who did not condemn her actions.

I should have known better than to go into a garden... by myself... to meet a man.

Even if she had not been assaulted, making that choice was enough to ruin her had it become known.

Knocking at the door made her jump. Was it Elijah? Back finally? Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her father's head jerk up. He had been silent since they left the ball, which was not entirely surprising. He had always been quieter than her mother, but his complete silence made her very nervous.

The sound of feminine voices, one of them quite strident, made her blink. A moment later, Mary, the Marchioness of Hartford, and Miss Lily Davis rushed into the room without waiting to be announced. Rex, the Marquess of Hartford, strolled in behind them, looking even more lion-like than he normally did. They were all still dressed for the evening, with Mary wearing a dark green gown that set off her strawberry blonde hair and eyes, and Lily still dressed as a debutante in pale lavender. Josie was shocked to see the latter there, especially without either her or her parents or godparents.

"Oh, my goodness, Josie, we came as soon as we heard!" Mary rushed forward. It had been *her* voice Josie had heard, haranguing Martin, the butler, to let them in. Considering how quiet Mary normally was, that was a shock.

"What are you doing here?" Josie's gaze went back and forth between them, finally settling on Lily's. "You know you cannot be here. I am ruined! You have to disassociate yourself from me."

"They heard? Did you hear that, Daniel? They heard! We are ruined!" Josie's mother wailed louder, making Josie cringe.

Sympathy suffused Mary and Lily's faces as they sat on either side of her. Mary's auburn locks were slightly disheveled, her green eyes flashing with emotion as she tried to rake her fingers through her hair before letting her hand drop when she met her coiffure. In contrast, Lily's dark hair was picture perfect, as was her purple

gown, and her expression was more solemn than angry.

They each took one of Josie's hands, and despite everything, Josie felt a little better. Though she wished Evie was there as well to make their foursome complete, having her two friends standing by her meant more than she could say.

"Silence, Petunia." Josie's father's voice cut through the air like a whip, shocking her mother into silence. Shocking the rest of them as well. Josie had never heard her father speak like that, even when her mother was at her most histrionic. Lily and Mary stared at him, along with Josie. "I will take care of this."

"I will go with you," Rex said. "I need to have a few words with Lord Stuart myself." He shot a glance at Mary that spoke volumes. Josie envied the close bond the two of them had. It did not seem to matter that they had only been married a matter of weeks—due to being caught kissing in the garden, nearly creating a scandal themselves—they clearly loved and understood each other. Being the Marchioness of Hartford had also given Mary a much-needed boost of confidence. Or perhaps being Rex's wife had done that.

"Very well," Josie's father said with a stiff nod. He cast his glance over the room, his expression only softening when his gaze landed on his daughter. Josie dropped her head. Disappointing her father was far, far worse than her mother. Her mother was always disappointed in her, but her father...

"I'm sorry, Papa," she whispered.

A moment later, booted feet stood before her, and her father bent down to give her a kiss on the top of her head.

"Do not worry, sweetheart. I will make this right. *Oliver* will make this right." There was a darkness to his tone that made Josie's heart ache. Oliver was Elijah and Joseph's father, and he had been friends with Josie's father for decades. If this caused a split between the families...

"I do not think Joseph actually sent the note." Despite her hopes, she did not wish to marry him under such circumstances, especially not if he still wanted to marry Miss Bliss.

"I will make this right," her father repeated.

It was her own life, yet she had no say. All she could do was watch as her father and Rex strode out the door into the night, heading to Stuart house to... well, to do whatever it was he thought would fix the situation. Likely to demand Joseph marry her.

What an awful, awful mess.

"What actually happened?" Lily asked, squeezing Josie's hand, refocusing her attention. There was nothing she could do about her father. She filled her friends in on the details, not sparing her description of her poor decisions.

Miraculously her mother stayed quiet during the entire recitation, appearing to be still stunned into silence by her father's order. Josie was thankful for the reprieve, though as she finished her recitation, her mother started sniffing again, her skin beginning to redden and blotch, a sign she was actually in distress. Josie braced herself for the oncoming recriminations, but to her shock, her mother jumped up and rushed over to Josie, wrapping her arms around her.

Rose-scented perfume, the scent her mother always wore, flooded her nostrils as her mother hugged her tight, and tears sprang to Josie's eyes at the sudden show of motherly support.

"That... that... vile blackguard! How dare he! Young women should be able to walk along garden paths without being accosted by villains!" The utter indignation in her mother's tone brought more tears to Josie's eyes. She had been blaming herself for going into the gardens alone, but her mother was correct.

What kind of vile human assaulted a young woman because she was alone? She *should* have been safe. Her largest concern should have been that she would be ruined because people assumed she went willingly with some man into the darkness, not being attacked and almost ravaged.

And now she was at the mercy of more men, waiting for her father and the Marquess of Stuart to decide her fate.

It was thoroughly infuriating, which was why tears ran down her face as the emotions as the events of the evening caught up with her. She felt like a wisp on the wind, blown about, with no say about where she went.

Chapter 3

Elijah

“I did not write that note.” The anguish in Joseph’s voice was unmistakable. Pacing back and forth across the floor, he looked ready to fall apart.

Elijah could not blame him. The life he wanted was falling apart around him, and he had not even been at the ball. He had been blissfully unaware of the drama until his father’s footman had arrived to pull him away from the Farthingale’s soiree.

“Do not be a fool. Of course, you didn’t.” Their father rubbed his forehead, drawing attention to the ever-growing amount of grey in his dark hair and the wrinkles creasing his brow. His elbows propped on his desk, he stared straight ahead, eyes unseeing, his mind clearly racing with the implications of the evening. He seemed at a bit of a loss. For the first time, he truly appeared to be old. Seeing him so stressed made Elijah even angrier at the entire situation. “No one thinks you did.”

“No, but someone did and ensured it would be found and that everyone would think I had. Someone set this up.” There was no doubt in Elijah’s mind. Josie said someone had jostled her in the ballroom, and she had lost the note. Since she did not have the mind of a spy, Elijah did not blame her for not realizing it was on purpose. Elijah banged his fist against the bookshelf he was

standing beside. The pain was slight and not nearly distracting enough from his troubled emotions. “They deliberately coaxed Josie into the gardens, using Joseph’s name, and attacked her. But why? For what purpose? Is there some rival for Miss Bliss’ affections we are unaware of?”

“No, no one.” Joseph shook his head, disgruntled.

Though Miss Bliss seemed to suit him very well, another year unwed, and she would be considered firmly on the shelf. Though she was a sweet young lady, the number of suitors vying for her hand was very low. In Elijah’s opinion, she would make an ideal wife—quiet, unassuming, and undemanding. However, she did not have a large dowry, her parents were only modestly well-connected, and although she was beautiful, it was not in a way that stood out. He believed Joseph was right about his lack of rivals.

“Maybe as a distraction?” Adam, their youngest brother and the most unassuming of the three of them, piped up. His normally cheerful expression was somber, his eyes slightly unfocused as he ran through all the various scenarios. Out of all of them, he was the best strategist and the best at seeing patterns in information, making him an invaluable codebreaker.

“A distraction? From what? Why ruin three lives for a distraction?” Joseph fumed, pacing back and forth across the carpet. He scowled at the ground. Though Elijah had confiscated the letter from the gossips, it had already been too late. Truthfully, taking it might work against them, too.

Would the Blisses even allow Joseph to propose to Miss Bliss with this scandal hanging over his head? They must be desperate to marry her off by now, but *how* desperate?

A knock at the door had all three brothers whirling around. Elijah’s heart jumped in his chest.

“Come in.” Father’s voice was tight as though he was bracing himself.

Cooper, the butler, opened the door, holding a note in his hand. As always, his expression was faultlessly blank. He was every inch

the proper butler. No one looking at him would ever guess he was also a deadly assassin and one of the Marquess' guards.

"This arrived for you, my lord." He came forward and handed it to Elijah's father, retreating from the room as quickly as he'd arrived.

"What is it?" Elijah asked before father even had it open. Father glanced at him with a touch of reproof, and Elijah subsided, though it was hard to contain his impatience. He was a man of action, but right now, there was nothing he could do, and it chafed.

Thankfully, his father did not make them wait, reading the note aloud. From the first word, the tension around the room intensified.

Uncle,

The man who gave the note to Josie has disappeared into the wind, but one of the footmen insists the man was an unknown Frenchman. However, the French delegation was at the Richmonds tonight, and none of them were missing. I will leave it to you to investigate that avenue further.

The gossip is already spreading that Joseph lured Josie to the gardens to dishonor her, and Elijah is lying to save him. The Blisses left their ball early, Miss Bliss appearing in distress.

I believe this is an attempt to distract you from finding the traitor, a retaliation for uncovering Collins, or both. Do try to focus.

All my love,

Evie

The room fell silent for a short moment before Father growled.

"I am going to wring that fool girl's neck when I get my hands on her." There was no heat to his voice, and they all knew the truth. When Evie did inevitably turn up again, they would all hug her, scold her, and be relieved she had come through another one of her self-imposed missions unscathed.

At least, Elijah hoped that was what would happen. Though Evie had been in dangerous situations before, this one might be the

most dangerous since she was completely on her own, rather than having convinced Father to let her join. She'd always had some kind of backup before.

"At least we know she's still in London," Adam said, raking his hand through his hair. He leaned his head back against his chair, closing his eyes, appearing almost limp with relief. At his words, the rest of them were able to relax slightly as well.

They had not been sure. After rescuing her friend Mary from Rupert Collins a few weeks ago, Evie had disappeared into the wind again. Elijah was now sure she had been the servant girl who had met Josie a few days ago at the bookshop. It was the only thing that made sense.

Which meant when he got his hands on Josie again...

The visage of her pale, frightened face flashed through his mind. He could not be too harsh on her after the ordeal she had gone through tonight.

What a mess.

"I think she and Adam must be right about trying to distract us," Elijah muttered. "Though the idea of retaliation has merit, too. It would explain a lot." They had unmasked Collins, who had admitted to organizing the assassination attempt on the Duke of York but claimed he had done so at the behest of another after they blackmailed him. Someone whose identity he did not know.

They had searched for Collins' puppet master but had not gotten very far in the past few weeks. Though, if they assumed this was a distraction, perhaps they knew more than they realized. Elijah resolved to go over all the information they had gathered again. Perhaps they had missed something or not realized the importance of something they found. He would focus on the French connection.

"We will have to divide our attention." Father sat up straighter, energy flowing back into his body as he began to marshal his thoughts, creating a plan of action. Relief flooded through Elijah. Though he knew Father could not control everything, with him at

the helm, it was hard to think anything could go wrong. "There's no help for it. We need to redouble our efforts to find out who orchestrated all this and investigate the French more thoroughly. I do not believe they could have done this on their own. Someone is masterminding this, who not only knows who I am but knows our family and how to manipulate all of us." His countenance darkened.

While it would have been comforting to think their enemy was foreign, the evidence to the contrary was piling up.

"What about Josie?" Elijah asked. She was the crux of the immediate problem.

Father hesitated, then looked at Joseph, his jaw tightening. Joseph paled, taking a step back.

"No... I... I want to marry Priscilla." His eyes darted around the room at Elijah, Adam, and Father, seeking support or possibly escape. It was not his fault his name was on the note. There was nothing he could have done, but his reputation would be tarnished by this. Everyone would think he was a rake, and eyes would be on both him and Elijah, probably Adam as well. It would affect their social standing at home, with the Pennyworths being neighbors. Everyone in Derbyshire loved Josie.

"That might not be an option anymore," Father said grimly. "If you do not marry Josie and marry Miss Bliss instead, assuming her parents allow it, the gossips will be relentless with all three of you. None of you will escape unscathed. Josie will unlikely find a husband, and the *ton* will turn on you and Miss Bliss. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not..." Joseph's voice trailed off, and they could all hear the unspoken 'but.'

But he was in love with Miss Bliss.

But he did not want to marry Josie.

Their villain, whoever he was, had set his trap well. No matter what Joseph chose to do, it would distract the family and keep the *ton's* eyes fixed firmly on them. Unless they managed to do

something unexpected.

Elijah's jaw clenched.

A knock sounded at the door again, relieving him of a decision for a few more precious moments. Cooper opened the door, and there was something about his expression or stature that drew their attention. An ominous quality hung in the air about him.

"Squire Pennyworth and the Marquess of Hartford are here to see you, my lord." Though his expression did not change one iota, there was still a hint of warning in his voice.

Father drooped again, his shoulders dropping. He and the squire had been lifelong friends, but here they were at odds. To save the future of Pennyworth's daughter, he would have to sacrifice his son's.

You know what you have to do. It is not that great a sacrifice. Perhaps it is not what Josie would want, but it is better than being married to a man who wishes he was married to someone else, and this way, at least Joseph will be able to find happiness.

Though he would be saddling himself with a wife who was in love with his brother.

Still.

Did he have any other choice?

When Squire Pennyworth walked into the room, his usually cheerful face was grave with the seriousness of the situation, and he looked as old as Elijah's father did. This was weighing heavily on both of them, and it was within Elijah's power to fix it.

Hartford looked at Elijah, his golden eyes contemplative. He lifted an eyebrow. Elijah thought Hartford anticipated what would happen. He knew Elijah too well.

"Welcome, Squire Pennyworth," Elijah said, stepping forward before anyone else could say anything. This was the only solution that would free his brother and lift the burden from his father. Adam could make the same offer, but it would not have the same effect as it would coming from him, the future Marquess. Suspicion of exactly who had caused Josie's dishevelment would shift, and

everyone would consider the matter resolved once she was married to him. “I am glad to see you this evening as I would like to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage.”

Chapter 4

Josie

“What is taking them so long?” The wait was becoming interminable.

Josie paced around the drawing room, Lily and Mary watching her from their places on the couch. After her initial show of support, her mother had devolved to her usual histrionics and taken to her bed. Josie had passed some of the time by changing her dress—which had caused her to cry all over again as she was forced to face the tattered fabric and the memories came rushing back—before taking up camp in the drawing room with the door open, so they would know the moment her father and Rex returned.

“I cannot imagine the discussion is easy,” Lily said soothingly, but Josie did not want to be soothed. She wanted to be there and to have a say in her future. Everything about her was jittery right now, as if her skin was too tight around her body, and her insides were being squeezed and squished.

A soft knocking at the window on the far side of the room had her spinning around. She did not know what she expected to see, but Evie’s face under a boy’s cap was *not* it.

“Evie!” They all whispered her name together and rushed to the window to open it and pull her in. Not that she needed their help,

despite the window being at her shoulder height, but Josie needed something to *do*.

Dressed as a boy in rough breeches and a loose shirt, her dark curls tucked under a brown cap, and smelling faintly of horse, Evie looked out of place in the fancy drawing room.

“Where on earth have you been?” Lily asked, frowning as she gave Evie’s outfit a once-over.

“Listening to the gossip in the stables,” Evie said, shrugging one shoulder. “No one pays attention to the grooms and tigers.” Interesting. Josie could only imagine the tigers, the young boys who were actually seated on the carriages behind their patrons, overheard quite a bit.

“What are they saying?” Josie’s hands gripped her skirts, fingers digging into the fabric. She already knew it would not be good, else Evie would not have come.

Dark eyes met hers, full of sympathy. Blast. It was worse than Josie thought. Evie was rarely sympathetic.

“It is flying already, despite Elijah’s confiscation of the note. It might have been better for you had he not taken it, though not for Joseph.” Evie’s lips twisted in an unamused smile. “Some are quite sympathetic to you, feeling Joseph played on your long acquaintance to lure you out. Others think you two must have been meeting in secret all this time and playing Miss Bliss for a fool.”

“And?” Josie asked when Evie hesitated. There was more. There had to be, else Evie would not have paused—a definite pause, not a finish.

“A few think you must have set it up to try to trap him into marriage,” Evie said in a rush, and Lily and Mary both gasped in indignation. Josie closed her eyes, guilt seeping through her. Was that not exactly the outcome part of her had hoped for?

“As if she would need to trap anyone into marriage.” Mary snorted. “The gentlemen are lining up to beg for her hand. She has already turned down five proposals this Season.”

Yes. Yes, she had, although now, she almost wished she had

not. She hadn't wanted to marry any of them, but she had not imagined a life *unwed* either. Even after realizing Joseph was likely to propose to Miss Bliss, Josie thought she would have time. Time to go home to lick her wounds and heal her battered heart and eventually find someone to marry. She had not thought it would be difficult, considering the five proposals she had received in her first season.

What a little fool she had been, not realizing how quickly it could all be taken away through no fault of her own.

Not no fault. You did not have to go out into the gardens.

Shut up. The risk was small if the note had truly been from Joseph. We would have walked out together with no harm done to my reputation, thanks to our long acquaintance. This is the fault of the villain who tricked and assaulted me. Young ladies should not have to worry about such knavery. It is that man's fault!

Though it did not assuage her guilt, she clung fast to the knowledge that her person should have been perfectly safe. Even her hysterical mother had thought so. Any man who would intentionally assault a young woman alone at a ball rather than assist her was a blackguard in gentlemen's clothing. Josie was not responsible for his actions, only her own.

"Joseph will have to marry her now," Lily said, shaking her head and casting a glance at Josie.

"Maybe I will have six refusals this Season. Oh, do not look at me like that. Would any of you want to be forced into a marriage with a man in love with someone else?" Josie scowled at Mary, who had been about to respond before Josie tacked on the last part. Mary had married Rex to save her own reputation.

Thankfully, he had wanted to marry her, and they had been well on their way to falling in love before the wedding. This was entirely different. Joseph not only did not want to marry Josie, he actively wanted to marry another woman. The more Josie thought about it, the more miserable it made her.

She could not possibly marry him now. They would both be

miserable. Though she tried to soothe her conscience by acknowledging she should have been safe going into the gardens, the truth was, Joseph had no part in the events of the evening, yet by her actions, he was involved. She had not questioned the note from him but should have. She would still swear it was his handwriting.

Josie had reacted impulsively, based on her own hopes rather than the evidence of the past weeks. Part of her self-recrimination came from knowing she should have realized Joseph did not want to marry her, no matter what the note said.

“The gossips will turn on you if you do not marry someone, preferably Joseph,” Evie pointed out the obvious, if unwelcome, point, though her tone was not unkind. “I would not mind having you as a cousin.”

“What a mess.” The energy that had kept her upright abandoned her, and Josie sat down on the couch, suddenly exhausted. If she could start the whole night over, she would do everything differently. “And I can do nothing about it. Being a woman is awful.”

Evie snorted. “It would not be so bad if the men were not so determined to keep us out of everything.”

Eyeballing her speculatively, Josie tilted her head.

“Perhaps I shall become a spy, like you. Surely, a fallen woman can get into places others cannot.” She was only half in jest, but Evie’s expression sobered immediately.

“No, Josie. You are better off where you are. I would not wish some of the things I have seen on anyone.” There was a haunted quality to her voice, and Josie immediately regretted her rash words. They all knew Evie’s life had been hard after her parents passed. There were several years between their deaths and when Evie’s uncle had found her living on the streets of London. She did not speak of that time often, and the little she had revealed had been chilling.

Josie did not wish for that.

“Well, if I do not marry Joseph, I will have to find something to do with myself. Perhaps I could go to France.”

“You will come and live with Rex and me.” Mary put her nose in the air, a stubborn glint in her eye. The transformation from purposeful wallflower to Marchioness had wrought a substantial change in her demeanor, and Josie had no doubt she was willing to take on the world. Her heart filled with love for her friend. As powerful as Rex was, and as little as he cared for Society’s whims and judgments, she could not do that to them. Perhaps as a very last resort, but not until then.

“That is very kind, but—” Josie cut off as the front door opened. Evie was gone and out the window in a flash, leaving them gaping at how quickly she moved. Hmm... perhaps Josie would not make a very good spy, though such speed was likely easier in breeches.

Her mind could not concentrate on Evie’s quick steps as she turned her head to look at her father and Rex. Both appeared worn but not distressed. Josie’s throat closed up, her hands bunching in the fabric of her skirts as her father turned tired eyes to her, his lips lifting in a pleased smile.

Relief poured through her.

“It is done,” he said, walking into the drawing room. Coming to a halt in front of her, he held out his hands, and Josie placed hers onto his palms. There was a peace in his eyes that had not been there when he left, a lightness to his step. “You will be married on Saturday.”

“Joseph does not mind?” The entreaty for reassurance from her father made her sound younger than usual, the desire of a little girl to be told that everything would be all right.

Her father blinked.

“Oh, no, sweetheart. You will be marrying Elijah.”

“What?” Horrified realization washed away everything else. She jerked her hands back, stepping away from her father and bumping into Mary and Lily, who were standing right behind her.

Elijah? No. Impossible. He did not even like her.

“Yes, *Elijah*.” Her father’s lips turned down, his expression growing stern. Josie recognized it from her childhood when he denied her—the expression she knew indicated there was no point in fighting because she would not win. Except she was not asking for a sweet or a new frock. This was her life! “He offered, and I accepted. We signed the marriage contracts, and under the circumstances, he is securing a special license so you can marry immediately.”

About to open her mouth to protest, to declare she would *not*, no matter what, Josie was yanked back by a firm grip on her arm.

“Let us speak with her for a few minutes, please,” Lily said, digging her fingers into Josie’s arm when Josie tried to pull away. “It has been a very trying evening, and... well, truthfully, none of us expected *Elijah* to...” Her voice trailed off, though the surprise was still evident in her tone.

Father’s countenance softened just a bit.

“Of course.” He turned to Mary’s husband. “Hartford. Would you like a glass of brandy?”

Glancing at Mary, Rex nodded his head. “Yes, I think that might be best while the ladies... discuss.” After another look at Mary, Rex followed Josie’s father out of the room.

Finally yanking her arm from Lily’s grip, Josie whirled on her two friends. She wanted to kick something. The only thing that was within reach was the settee, so she kicked its wooden leg, hard enough the whole piece of furniture jolted.

“*Elijah! Elijah!* I cannot marry *Elijah!*” she fumed, glaring at Mary and Lily.

“You said you did not want to marry a man who is in love with someone else,” Lily pointed out, taking another step back at the expression on Josie’s face. She held up her hands placatingly. “This really is the best solution, Josie. You must see that.”

Impossible. She looked at Mary, and her heart sank when she saw her other friend nodding her head in agreement with Lily.

“If you were to marry Joseph, it would help some but not all the gossip. After the way he has danced attendance on Miss Bliss all Season, some people would say you trapped him. In fact, if you do marry him, more of them might believe that.”

Josie closed her eyes. Swallowed. The gossips of London were vicious. She could see that. Worse... at home, things would be no better. Mary, Lily, and Evie were hardly the only ones who had guessed her feelings for Joseph. The gossip would likely be far worse in Derbyshire than here in the city, and none of it complimentary to her. She opened her eyes again, nodding at the truth of Mary’s words.

“How does marrying Elijah change that?” she asked hollowly, sinking down on the settee she had kicked. Lily and Mary moved to her sides again, taking her hands as they had when they arrived. Their sympathy was palpable, which she both wanted and hated, hating that it was necessary.

“It frees Joseph to marry Miss Bliss,” Mary said quietly. Pain stabbed Josie’s heart, but she pushed it aside. There were far more important things now. “The gossips will assume Elijah was the one who met you in the gardens. Or that he did indeed rescue you, and he will be cast as the hero.”

“And he is the heir, the future Marquess. That has weight.” If anyone would know, it was Lily. Her parents were not *ton*, but with their connections to the Duke and Duchess of Frederick, Lily was treated far differently than she would have been with less lofty godparents. “The *ton* will treat a future Marchioness with more respect than the wife of a second son.”

“Some might even find it romantic if they think Elijah saved you from a villain, then saved you again by offering marriage,” Mary speculated. As the most experienced in society and with an aunt who was particularly savvy at social maneuvering, Josie had to bow her head to Mary’s expertise.

It seemed it truly would be best for everyone.

If she truly loved Joseph, she should want him to be happy. He

would not be happy forced into marriage with her, and she would not have been happy, either. Elijah had saved them both from that fate. She supposed she should be grateful. Instead, she felt hollowed out, as if someone had scooped out her emotions, leaving her an empty wooden shell.

Joseph deserved to have the life he wanted. He should not be dragged into her mess. If Elijah was willing to sacrifice himself on the marital altar to save his brother's future—and hers—she could hardly do less. She only hoped Joseph and Miss Bliss chose to settle somewhere other than Camden Hall in Derbyshire, so she did not have to watch them live out the life she had always imagined for herself.

“Then I suppose I marry Elijah this Saturday.” The wrong Stuart brother. The one who did not like her. That was who she was to marry. If she had any tears left after such an awful night, she would have wept.

Her friends crowded in around her, murmuring everything would work out, but Josie knew better. Nothing would ever be right again.

Chapter 5

Elijah

Three days to plan a wedding meant everything happened in a rush, and he did not have the chance to see Josie for more than a few moments during a ‘celebratory’ luncheon on Friday. Certainly, he was not able to get her alone. Her mother actually tutted at him when he suggested he and Josie go for a walk around the lawn together, telling him they had guests to attend to.

Not that Josie had looked particularly eager to go walking on his arm. For the first time, she appeared skittish, unsure of herself. She had not hesitated to hide behind her mother’s skirts, making him feel even more unnerved about their future together.

Elijah had wanted to reassure her she had no need to worry. He intended to be a kind and gentle husband, though he would expect her to follow a certain standard of behavior, especially when they were in London among the *ton*. She was the future Marchioness and would represent the Stuart family.

Whether or not her current subdued state was due to their upcoming nuptials or to a newfound maturity remained to be seen.

Now, it was the morning of his wedding, and not only was he getting married—something he never thought would happen—he was marrying a woman who wished it was his brother at the altar instead of him, which was a lowering thought.

Said brother was beaming with happiness. Miss Bliss had accepted his offer, and they would announce their engagement next week. With Elijah marrying Josie, the gossip had shifted to whether he had been her rescuer or her ravisher, leaving Joseph and Miss Bliss unscathed.

Which meant it was worth it.

“Things are not so bad, you know. Josie is very beautiful.” Adam grinned at Elijah from where he was lounging in a chair. The youngest Stuart brother was having far too much fun at his brothers’ expense.

“I know she is beautiful.” Exactly how beautiful, he had not really realized until their engagement luncheon. He had never really taken the time to notice. As his neighbor, he had seen her grow up. He had been aware the gentlemen of London considered her a great beauty and a prime catch after her debut, but somehow, he had not noticed how golden her curls had grown, the way she filled out her gowns, the pretty pink of her lips...

Bedding his new wife would be no hardship, though the realization he was attracted to Josie had been stunning and slightly uncomfortable. He had thought of her as a little girl, despite her debut, and the realization of her as a woman was startling.

“Unfortunately, her beauty does not negate her feelings for Joseph.” Since their other brother was not in the room, Elijah did not feel guilty about venting his concern. He had resolved not to mention it again to Joseph since it would only make him feel bad.

To his surprise, Adam snorted.

“They would have made a hash of things. You will be far better for her.”

That was a surprising observation.

“Really?” Elijah’s tone was dry as he raised a brow at his youngest brother, curiosity piqued. Adam was very good at reading people, something Elijah had relied on in the past. “Me, the Stuart brother she likes the least?”

“You are the only one who can rein her in.” Adam’s grin

widened as he mimicked the gesture of pulling on a horses' reins. The analogy was a little too apt for Elijah's comfort. He had often thought of Josie as needing to be broken in, the same way a wild mare would. "Joseph would let her run roughshod over him, and I find her antics too amusing to try. She may not realize it, but she is the type who craves control. Someone who will put their foot down when she toes the line—or throw her over his knee."

"Really?" Elijah repeated dubiously. "Josie? You think Josie Pennyworth is one of *our* set?"

By 'our set,' he meant those who were members of the Society of Sin, not the *ton*. While the Society's interests were varied, the vast majority of them enjoyed pleasure play that included pain, domination, and submission. There were a few feisty women among those who liked to give up control to another, but Elijah had not paid much attention to them. He had always considered them too much work, preferring the women who eagerly got on their knees and offered up their submission as a gift.

"Not only that, I think she will be good for you. You need a challenge."

This time it was Elijah's turn to snort. Josie, good for him? Hardly. Though he could not deny she would be a challenge. The idea of introducing her to the Society's activities... well. She was a debutante, a virgin who had nearly been ravished earlier this week. The Society was not for her. Besides, it would be far too dangerous. Despite Collins' apprehension, it was always possible there was another traitor within the Society.

The connection between the Society and Collins' traitorous activities had been why Elijah had joined its ranks in the first place. No, it would be best to keep Josie far, far away from the Society for multiple reasons. No matter what Adam thought.

The white-and-silver froth of her wedding gown did not reflect her emotions. The fabric should be black, denoting the death of her hopes and dreams.

Run. I should run. Far, far away.

Except she had nowhere to go. No way to earn a living. Perhaps if she disguised herself as a boy, the way Evie did, she could help with horses somewhere... but the moment she was discovered to be female, she would be turned out. Or worse.

You are doing this for Joseph.

Yes, yes. Marrying Joseph's brother to save Joseph. Josie smoothed her hands over her skirt, her heart breaking at the irony. It had been three days, yet she had not reconciled herself to the idea. Nor did she know what to say to Elijah, though she felt she should say something. An apology.

How did one offer a proper apology for accidentally trapping a man into marriage? Especially when she was in love with his brother.

"Oh, you look perfect, darling." Mother fussed over the tendrils of hair hanging down from Josie's elaborate coiffure. "Every inch a Marchioness. My father would be so pleased." Tears filled her eyes. Though they had eventually reconciled, Grandfather, a Marquess himself, had been incensed when Mother married Josie's father, a mere squire.

Josie remembered him as a doting, loving grandfather who had always been a bit awkward with her own father, but she also knew the story. It had been her birth that had brought her grandfather back into their lives and softened his stance. Today, he would have been proud to see her married to a future Marquess, though the circumstances leading to the marriage would have likely given him heart palpitations.

"And you and Papa?" Josie asked ruefully.

"Oh, we are very pleased, too." Mother stepped back to admire her handiwork. "We always thought it would be lovely if you married Elijah."

“You thought I would marry *Elijah*?” Staring, Josie felt her eyes bulge. Josie had thought the entirety of Derbyshire knew of her feelings for Joseph, including her parents.

“Oh yes, dear. The two of you always had such a connection. You following him around, him pulling you out of scrapes. Perhaps we should not have been surprised at how today came about, considering your history.” Mother smiled happily, turning to pick up her fan, not seeming to realize she was causing Josie all sorts of consternation. She had been following Joseph.

Well, sometimes, she had followed Elijah, but only because he had been such a prig, and she had been trying to loosen him up. He *had* made a pastime of pulling her and Evie out of various scrapes, which was impossible to deny.

But a connection? Between her and Elijah?

Animosity perhaps. Frustration, certainly. They had always clashed, not connected. But if it made her mother happy to think so, Josie did not have it in her heart to disillusion her.

There was a knock on the door, and one of the maids peeked her head in.

“Excuse me, my lady, miss. Lady Hartford and Miss Davis are here.”

“Oh, good.” Josie turned from the mirror, only to be stopped by a gesture from her mother. Her brow furrowed in confusion. She wanted to go see her friends.

“Send them up in a few minutes,” Mother said, sitting on the chaise. The maid nodded and closed the door. Putting her hands on her hips, Josie frowned at her mother, who ignored her expression. “Now, dear, we need to talk about tonight,”

“Tonight?” Josie wracked her brain for what her mother could be referring to. Why did they need to talk about tonight?

“Yes, darling. Tonight, you will no longer be in our home.” Mother sniffled but controlled her reaction, only a little teary-eyed. “And Elijah will have certain... expectations of his wife.”

Oh. Oh. Josie’s cheeks heated. She knew exactly what

expectations her mother was talking about, but she could not tell her mother that she knew. Then she would have to explain Evie was not the virginal young lady everyone thought. Evie had already explained to her, Josie, Lily, and Mary, both the act and how to make it pleasurable. Anything Evie had not told them, Mary had— Oh!

“Mary has already explained... everything,” Josie said hastily. It felt like her cheeks were on fire from the force of her blush.

Far from looking relieved, her normally prim and proper mother appeared disgruntled.

“Oh, well... did she tell you it is supposed to feel good? Though I supposed with Hartford for a husband, he should know how to make it feel good—”

“Mother!” Josie was utterly scandalized. Mary had told her that her aunt had attempted to have the ‘wedding night talk’ and had barely been able to get the words out. Hearing her own mother talking about *that* and how it was supposed to feel, and knowing she was talking about Josie’s father...

“Well, he should, if rumor is correct about his exploits. I cannot imagine he would have his reputation if he did not.” Mother thoughtfully tapped her lips with her fan. “Elijah does not have the same reputation, but I cannot imagine he is entirely ignorant. If it does not feel good, you should tell him to—”

“Mother!” Her voice came out as a high-pitched shriek.

Mother frowned. “Do not be so overdramatic, Josie. I was only saying, your father does this—”

“*Mother, stop!*” Josie put her hands over her ears, feeling faint. If it came to a choice between marrying Elijah right this minute or listening to her mother say one more word about doing the marital act with her father, Josie was ready to run to the altar.

And her mother. Calling *her* overdramatic. Well, if she was, where did her mother think she got it from?

Josie had never been so relieved to see her friends when they came into the room. Her mother pouted and sighed as Mary and

Lily rushed in, hurrying to hug Josie. Sometimes, it was easy to forget she must get some of her wilder starts from her mother. As flighty and overdramatic as she was now, she *had* eloped with a squire for love, defying all conventions and her own father. One day, Josie was sure she would even find this conversation humorous, though, at the moment, it was mortifying.

Watching them all with a tender expression, Mother finally gave up. Thankfully.

“Well, I will leave you girls for now. There are some things I must see to before we leave for the ceremony.” Sweeping up, Mother gave Josie a kiss on the cheek before departing.

With a groan, Josie collapsed onto the sofa, and her friends crowded around her. She did not know what was worse—being reminded her time before she became Elijah’s wife was growing shorter or her mother’s attempts to explain the marital act. At least her friends would enjoy the story.

Chapter 6

Josie

It was just like one of her dreams.

Lily preceded her up the aisle. She stood, her hand wrapped around her father's arm, stomach full of butterflies, looking down the aisle at... Elijah. That was where her dream ended, and her nightmare began.

Not that Elijah was a nightmare. Calling him such was a disservice. He was breathtakingly handsome, a true gentleman, and a future Marquess. Likely there were debutantes among the guests who wept with envy over Josie's good fortune.

At least she did not have to look at Joseph as she walked down the church aisle. Elijah had chosen to ask Adam to stand with him. Like Mary, Joseph would be seated among the guests. It was a small mercy.

Somber and stern as ever, Elijah watched her walk down the aisle. If she could have slowed her steps, she would have, but she matched her father's all the way down, her heart sinking as she went. Adam was grinning widely, encouragingly at her, but she barely saw him.

Her heart thudded in her chest so loudly, it was a wonder she could hear the music.

They reached the end of the aisle. Stopped. Father Gregory

spoke a few words Josie could not hear over the buzzing in her ears, then her father took her hand from his arm and gave it to Elijah. His fingers wrapped around hers, gently but firmly, helping her to step up, so they were facing each other in front of Father Gregory.

Josie stared at him. He stared back at her. Such a familiar face, yet it was as though she was seeing it for the first time. Black hair waving back from his face, eyes so dark they were nearly as black as his hair, a chiseled jawline, broad shoulders, and an altogether handsome visage. So very much like Joseph, yet not. The thought sent a niggle of guilt through her. She should be focusing on Elijah, not Joseph. She needed to forget about Joseph.

The gentle pressure of fingers squeezing hers made her jump. She had not been paying attention to the ceremony.

“Um...”

“Repeat after me,” Father Gregory said kindly. “I, Josephina Pennyworth.”

“I, Josephina Pennyworth,” she repeated dutifully.

Any moment now, she would wake up to find this past week had been a bad dream. That she had not been accosted in a garden. That she did not have to marry Elijah.

Except she finished her vows. Elijah finished his. The cool, heavy weight of her wedding band slid onto her finger. And she did not wake. She stared at the circle of gold that was supposed to represent their ever-lasting unity as her slim fingers rested against Elijah’s palm.

Then his fingers closed. Tugged. Pulled her toward him.

Josie’s head swung up so she could stare at Elijah, and Father Gregory’s words belatedly registered.

You may kiss the bride.

She expected a mere brush of lips, a brotherly kiss of necessity.

What she got was one of Elijah’s hands on her waist, the other neatly trapping her fingers within his as his lips descended to claim hers. Josie had been kissed a few times, mostly on dares. One of

those kisses, from the son of a visiting squire, had been interrupted by Elijah himself.

None of them had felt like *this*.

Possessive. Provoking. Hot.

Josie's lips parted beneath his, his tongue licking her lip for just a moment before he pulled away, leaving her breathless, staring, and wanting. What on earth had just happened?

Elijah

Leading Josie down the aisle, Elijah was shaken.

He had not meant to kiss her like that.

Well, he had but had not expected her reaction. Or his.

The kiss had been meant as claiming in front of the *ton*, his brother, and for Josie herself. The paleness of her face, the way she had stared at him with no happiness in her expression, had dug under his skin as the ceremony progressed. Yes, he knew of her feelings for Joseph. Yes, he knew she wished she was not marrying Elijah, and it had pricked his pride. He had not thought that he could wipe away everything with a mere kiss, but he had wanted to fluster her. To make her think of him differently. To make her forget his brother, if only for a moment, and focus on him, the man she was actually marrying.

Then his hand had touched her waist. Felt her trembling. His lips had met hers. The heat that flared between them had been entirely unexpected, and the way his body reacted to her closeness, to her kiss, had thrown him off guard. She was still Josie, but his senses recognized her as a woman, not only a woman but a woman he desired.

He had pulled away before he could make a spectacle of both of them, but the experience left him reeling.

The walk gave them time to compose themselves, and they were able to smile and do the pretty for the receiving line,

accepting all manner of congratulations and well wishes from the attendees. Thankfully, there were not many of them since they had chosen to keep the guest list small under the circumstances.

Elijah had a moment of shocking jealousy when Joseph came through. He could feel Josie stiffen beside him as Joseph took her hands in his and gave her a brotherly kiss on the cheek, welcoming her to the family. Adam had done exactly the same thing, as had Father, but Elijah had not wanted to punch either of them in the face. It was not Joseph's fault. Hell, it was not Josie's fault either.

It was something they would all have to live with, though he did not like it.

Getting into the carriage that would convey them to their wedding brunch, they were alone together for the first time. Her white-and-silver skirts were spread over the dark red of the bench, and her blonde curls arranged in a pile atop her head made her neck look even more slender. The pale flush of pink on her cheeks as she averted her eyes made her look every inch the blushing bride. The curtains were open, and they could hear the coachman hie the horses into motion.

Sitting across from her, Elijah was uncomfortably aware of his newfound attraction to her, the way she had felt pressed against him for that brief moment, and how her lips had parted beneath his. He was hard as a rock, with no hope of relief any time soon. It had been a long time since he had been with a virgin, but he knew he would need patience. Josie likely knew very little and had recently had a traumatic experience at the hands of a man.

"I will be kind," he blurted out, not at all the practiced speech he had planned.

Blinking rapidly in surprise, Josie met his gaze for the first time since stepping into the carriage, staring at him from across the space.

"What?"

Her reaction made him feel even more foolish, and he stiffened his spine defensively. Cleared his throat.

“I will be a kind husband. I wanted to reassure you. I know we have not always gotten along over the years, but I think we can have a good marriage if we are both willing to bend a little. I will not hamper your enjoyment of riding when we are in the country, though I would ask that you not wear breeches when we have guests.” That seemed eminently fair to him since he would prefer she not wear breeches at all, but he was well aware how much Josie loved riding. The residents of Derbyshire were used to seeing her so garbed and would not gossip... or perhaps, only gossip a little.

“I see.” Josie sat up straighter, her chin lifting in a posture he recognized and made him inwardly groan. What on earth had he said to set her off? “What about your ‘family business’? Will I be a part of that, or will you shut me out the same way you do Evie?”

Scowling, his hand clenched into a fist on his knee, that Josie even *knew* about the ‘family business.’ His father was the spymaster for the crown, and Elijah intended to succeed him there, as well as in the title—something Elijah wished otherwise. Women should not poke their noses into such matters. He had vehemently argued against his father occasionally using Evie’s assistance, especially when she had gone off on her own and inserted herself into their business. No matter how valuable her assistance had been, it had not been worth it in the long run, and it had only encouraged her to continue her wild starts, leaving them to worry in her absence.

“You will not need to concern yourself with such matters.”

END

Josie

She should not have been surprised at dictatorial Elijah making his presence known. In a way, it was a relief. When he was busy putting his foot down, she was no longer distracted by how handsome he was or how it had felt when he kissed her. This was

solid, familiar ground, and she clung to that familiarity like a child with a favorite toy.

Josie crossed her arms over her chest.

"I am already concerned. I am already involved. You would not have even known about Collins if it were not for me and Lily." They had been the ones to sound the alarm when Collins had kidnapped Mary. If not for them and their quick thinking, Mary would be dead, and Collins would have escaped, and no one would have been the wiser. Even now, she shivered to think about it.

"We would have found him eventually and without risking Mary's life," Elijah snapped, his scowl deepening. "That is why I—" He cut whatever he was about to say so abruptly, Josie knew it must be important, something he did not want her to know about. She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Why you what?" She sighed as she realized what he must be talking about. He assumed she did not know, would not know, and she took great joy in dispelling him of that illusion. "You joined the Society because you knew there was a connection there."

Though Mary said he fit in admirably, although Josie had trouble picturing despite Mary's vivid description of Elijah shirtless, whipping a woman while a crowd watched. The very idea had made her shiver and feel rather odd. Now, sitting across from him in this cramped space, as he went ramrod straight, eyes flashing, his expression sterner than she had ever seen, those same odd feelings fluttered through her body.

"How do you know about the—" He cut off again, shaking his head, his tone turning to disgust. "Mary. Rex needs to take her more firmly in hand."

Scowling at him, Josie sniffed.

"He already spansks her. What more do you want?" The idea both horrified and titillated. Josie still was not sure how she felt about it. Mary did not seem to mind. She had said it was even enjoyable sometimes, but Josie thought she might be trying to convince herself more than the rest of them.

“Rex has gone soft.” The derisive note in his voice was still there, and Josie gaped at him.

Rex? *Soft*? How Elijah could say such a thing was beyond her. She had an easier time believing Mary’s lurid descriptions of Elijah’s behavior at the Society’s events. The hard gaze he fixed on Josie had her scooting back in her seat. She had been the recipient of Elijah’s stern scoldings most her entire life, but he had never looked at her quite like this. “Since you already know about the Society, rest assured, wife, I have not gone soft, and I will not tolerate the kind of nonsense Rex does.”

There was a silkiness to the threat that sent a shiver through Josie, leaving her as speechless and breathless as being reminded that she was now his wife. This was a side to Elijah she had never seen before, and she was not prepared for it.

The carriage lurched to a halt before she could respond.

Elijah’s expression shifted, not a great deal, but he looked like an entirely different person. His brow softened, the corners of his lips lifting as he opened the door and hopped out, holding out his hand to help her down. Josie stared at him—this man she had not wanted to marry and was no longer sure she knew as well as she thought she did, but there was no other option.

She took his hand and climbed out of the carriage, her heart fluttering inside her chest, even more acutely aware of his large, intimidating presence beside her.

Chapter 7

Elijah

The brunch was small, as the ceremony had been. The guests were made up of family, Josie's closest friends, and Elijah's father's men, the latter there in case the traitor made their move. During the ceremony, Elijah had been far more focused on Josie, but during the brunch, he was grateful for the distraction. He needed time to rearrange his thoughts about how to deal with his bride.

Never before had he worried about being distracted by a woman. Then again, he had never had a wife. Or was it because it was Josie? He felt doubly responsible because he had always watched over her and Evie, and now her safety and behavior were even more his bailiwick.

Looking at his new bride, her pale face, his youngest brother's words about him being better suited to Josie than Joseph ran through his head.

Surely not.

Then, he had not expected her to know anything about the Society—those within the Society of Sin called it 'the Society' as a way of differentiating it from 'Society' at large. Perhaps he should have. As young girls, she, Evie, Mary, and Lily had shared everything and were even closer now, if it was possible. Still, he would have thought the subject matter was too personal.

Well, he would not make that mistake again, and he would impress upon Josie the need to keep their personal business *personal*. He had not spent years cultivating his upright reputation for nothing. He had even stayed away from Rex and his other friends who indulged in the wilder pastimes, denied his urges, and only recently joined the Society because of the connection to the traitor.

Though he could not deny that returning to such pursuits had made him feel alive again in a way he had not anticipated, he would only be able to enjoy it until they caught the traitor. Probably. It would be difficult to give up again, but he did not like the idea of being unfaithful to his wife, even if he had not intended to marry. That was not who he wanted to be.

He would have to enjoy it while it lasted.

"I must tell you, the expression on your face does not reassure me that you are truly content with this arrangement."

"It is a little late for that, is it not?" Elijah asked, amused as he turned to face his middle brother. Again, a pang of jealousy hit his chest when he looked at Joseph, reminded of Josie's reaction to him in the receiving line. He shoved the emotion aside. He knew neither Joseph nor Josie would be the type to betray him, so his jealousy was unwarranted. Josie could not control her feelings for Joseph, and hopefully, those feelings would fade. Tonight, Elijah would get to work on showing her just how enjoyable marriage to *him* would be. He had found, over the years, giving a woman pleasure could engage her emotions as surely as anything else.

Joseph sighed, turning away and looking around the room at the gathered guests. His expression was fairly neutral, and only someone who knew him as well as Elijah did would see the guilt he felt.

"I know. I cannot help but feel this is my fault, that I should be the one marrying Josie today."

"No, this was the right thing to do." Elijah put his hand on Joseph's shoulder, doing his best to comfort him without making it

obvious. The last thing they needed was more gossip making the rounds. “She will be better protected with my title, and you and Miss Bliss will be able to marry and be happy. This way, I won’t have the matchmaking mamas throwing their daughters at my head anymore.”

With a snort of laughter, Joseph’s guilt broke. “They are likely very disappointed to miss out on a future Marquess, but there will be other quarry. You have taken Josie out of the petticoat line, which should make things easier for the rest of the debutantes.”

That was a fact. Beautiful enough to be a Diamond of the First Water, an Original, with her sunny and outspoken personality, well-connected, and with a substantial dowry, Josie was everything the *ton* expected a man such as he to want in a bride. She had been wildly popular among the gentlemen.

Elijah dropped his hand from Joseph’s shoulder as Rex ambled up. The leader of the Society of Sin always looked a bit out of place at formal gatherings, as though he was a lion who had been temporarily leashed but might decide to do away with his tether at any moment. He had lost some of his rakish air since becoming a married man. The matrons of the *ton* had been disgruntled to find the notorious Marquess of Hartford was in love with his wife and faithful to her.

Personally, Elijah thought they were all rather slow on the uptake. Rex’s reputation had become less deserved over the years. He was still the leader of the Society and wielded a great deal of power within Society, but his exploits had ceased years ago, and his proclivities became decidedly tamer. Elijah had been surprised how little Rex indulged in the Society’s decadences, even before his marriage to little Mary.

“Welcome to the club of married men. You will not be able to get rid of me now.” Rex smiled wickedly, his golden eyes lit with mischief.

“I never wanted to be rid of you,” Elijah protested, though he knew his words were not entirely true. After their school days, he

had thrown himself into learning his father's business and had not had time for his friends, especially scandalous friends like Rex, but he had missed him.

"Well, you will not be able to now, even if you change your mind." Rex chuckled. "You are a married man, and your wife and my wife are practically joined at the hip."

"Do not remind me." Elijah scowled.

He could do with them being a little less joined, considering the scrapes Mary had gotten into recently—disguising herself and risking her reputation by going undercover into the Society, letting a man lure her into a carriage with a false story, and getting herself kidnapped. Clearly, time spent with Josie and Evie had rubbed off on her, rather than the other way round. Josie had better not expect to repeat Mary's antics. He looked around the room.

"Where are they? They had better not be getting into more mischief."

"They had to visit the retiring room," Rex replied easily, amusement lighting his face. "I am sure there is not too much trouble they can get into there."

Before Elijah could answer, a footman stopped in front of him with a note on a tray.

"This was delivered for you, my lord. The boy who brought it said it was urgent." As Elijah picked up the note, the footman gave a slight bow before walking away.

"An urgent note of congratulations?" Joseph's amusement was clear, and Rex chuckled.

Elijah ignored them, opening the crisp, white paper. Dark, bold letters written in a slanted hand jumped out at him, their threatening message clear.

Congratulations Durham. I am sure you think you thwarted me, marrying Miss Pennyworth in your brother's place.

Enjoy your marriage while it lasts. Do you think your bride will enjoy being a widow more than a wife?

Jerking his head up, he cast his gaze around the room. Those who met his gaze started to smile, then looked away when his expression registered. None of them seemed suspicious.

“Go get that footman,” he ordered Joseph. “Get a description of the boy who delivered this.” It was an incredible long shot but worth trying. This was the first time the traitor had dared to contact him or anyone that he knew of directly. Joseph took off after the footman while Rex stared at him. “Go guard the retiring room. Keep your eye on the ladies. All the ladies. I will send help.”

Realizing the urgency of the situation, Rex hurried away without questioning him. Crumpling the note, Elijah set his jaw and strode across the room toward his father. They would have to end the brunch early to discuss this latest development.

Josie

“Do you have a particular fondness for retiring rooms at weddings?” Josie teased when she entered to find Evie as she had expected when Lily and Mary had come to fetch her.

“You are a wretch,” Evie said fondly, coming forward to hug her fiercely. “I cannot believe you are my cousin now.”

“You certainly do not look the part.” Josie wrapped her arms around her friend and squeezed tightly. Evie was dressed as a servant, as she had been at Mary’s wedding. She had applied makeup to her face to obscure her beauty and features even more than usual, and her long, dark hair was tucked up under a scarf. “And I married the wrong cousin.”

“I think you married the right one,” Lily interrupted, and Josie turned to glare at her, breaking apart from Evie. “Oh, do not look at me like that. I know you love Joseph, but he has caused you nothing but heartbreak over the years. Elijah has always looked out for you.” The statement was unnervingly close to what her mother had said.

"She does not look heartbroken today," Mary chimed in, tilting her head to scrutinize Josie's expression.

"Why are you all against me today?" Josie scowled. "Of course, I am still heartbroken. But I had some time to adjust my expectations."

"Ah, yes, three days," Lily said dryly. "Three days ago, you were crying into your tea."

"What else am I supposed to do?" Josie was beginning to feel very cross with her friends. So, she was no longer bemoaning her fate or crying into her tea. She'd had all Season to accustom herself to the idea Joseph would marry Miss Bliss, and she would have to marry someone else. "I had the morbs, but now, I am going to make the best of my life. Besides, now that I am married to Elijah, surely I will be able to find out more about what he and Evie's uncle are keeping from her about the traitor."

"Do you think Elijah will let you?" Lily was clearly skeptical, pricking Josie's pride. *Let her*. Since when had she ever waited for anyone to let her do something? The threat of being spanked by him had taken her aback, but now it felt more like a challenge. He thought he could keep her hemmed in with his threats, did he? Perhaps she might even be like Mary and would enjoy such activities.

Regardless, Josie had promised to help her friend, and she would. Besides, if the traitor was the reason for her being attacked and now married to Elijah, as Evie suspected, she had a personal matter to settle with the blackguard.

"Elijah shall not rule me." She tossed her head. "I will do as I please, as I have always done."

"This should end well," Mary murmured. "You are going to have a very red bottom if you keep that up."

"I did not need to hear that." Evie nudged Mary with her elbow. "That is my cousin, remember."

"You are the one who set me to finding out more about the Society," Mary reminded her, bumping her hip against Evie's. "It is

not my fault Elijah joined. I didn't want to see him in all his perverted glory." Lily giggled, but Josie was suddenly ill to her stomach—even knowing about Elijah's participation, she had not really thought much about it, especially since realizing she would have to marry him.

Would Elijah engage in the Society's gatherings now that he was married? She could not imagine him taking her to such functions, which would mean he would go alone. Would he still touch other women, spank other women, now that he was married?

Josie did not like that idea at all. Even though she did not have the same feelings for Elijah as she had for Joseph, she realized she wanted some trust, faithfulness between them. What an awful time to have that revelation. It was a little late to discuss such matters with him, wasn't it?

Sudden knocking at the door made all of them freeze. Evie shrank before their eyes, stepping back against the wall and blending in with her head down and hands folded properly in front of her, like a servant awaiting instruction.

"Mary? Are you in there?" Rex's deep voice was easily recognizable, though slightly muffled by the door. There was a tightness to his tone.

Evie lifted her head to wave at them, the slight sheen in her eyes the only sign of her emotion. Josie's heart thudded in her chest. She wished Evie could join them outside but knew Evie thought she was doing the right thing, and Josie believed she was as well.

"We are here," Mary said, opening the door. "What is wrong?"

The moment he laid eyes on her, Rex's broad shoulders relaxed.

"I am not sure. Elijah received a note, then sent Joseph running to try to discover the sender and me here to guard the three of you." He cast his golden gaze over them as if taking stock of their well-being.

Josie's curiosity was piqued.

“Where is he now?” she asked, stepping past Rex and into the hall. Something about the note must be very important, and she wanted to know what it said.

Chapter 8

Josie

Her new husband was standing with his father, youngest brother, and two other men she recognized. Captain Nathan Jones and Captain Anthony Browne had come along to rescue Mary when she had been kidnapped—though their services had ultimately been unnecessary. They were spies for Evie’s Uncle Oliver, though Elijah had told her they were friends of his when she inquired about their presence on the guest list.

“I do not want to put anyone in danger—” Elijah cut off what he was saying as Josie approached, his gaze meeting hers. The emotion bubbling in his dark eyes was more than protective, though she could not put her finger on what else was there. Elijah straightened. “Josie. I will join you as soon as I am done talking to my father.”

Sensing her two friends coming up alongside her, Josie put her hands on her hips. Behind her, she heard Rex’s quiet laugh.

“Or I will join you now. Where is this note?”

The look Elijah cast over her shoulder at Rex was half exasperation and half anger.

“You told them?” he asked Rex, right over her head, as if she did not exist. Josie scowled at him and barely managed to refrain from stomping her foot. Captain Browne watched her warily as if

he thought she might throw a tantrum in the middle of her wedding brunch.

“Of course, I told them. I do not make a habit of lying to my wife.”

“Yes, Elijah. Rex does not make a habit of lying to his wife. Is that a habit you intend to embark on?” Josie held out her hand. “I want to see the note.”

“Absolutely not.” Elijah shoved it in his pocket, then turned back to his father. “We need to end the brunch... now.”

“What? No!” Josie, Lily, and Mary protested in unison. “Are you mad? What was in that note?”

“No, I am deadly serious. I need to leave and help Joseph hunt down the delivery boy, then the person who gave him the note.” There was a steeliness to Elijah’s expression she had never seen, but it did not matter. Josie was not about to be abandoned at her wedding brunch. As much as she wanted to know what was in the note that had caused his reaction, she had to prioritize keeping him from running off because of it.

“Absolutely not. What will people think? If you recall, the whole reason for this marriage was about what people would think!” Her voice was a little louder and getting shriller. Lily nudged her in the side and stepped forward, keeping her voice low but urgent.

“Josie is right. You will set off a torrent of gossip if you end the brunch early, especially if you leave Josie’s side immediately. You are already the focus of so much attention. The best thing you can do is behave like a newly married man and let others do this part for you. That is why Captain Jones and Captain Browne are here, is it not?” Even though Josie was standing slightly behind Lily and could not see her expression, she knew Lily had just arched a dismissive brow at Elijah, in the way only she could.

“Exactly. Not only that, but if you hie off, when you return, you will still have to live with me.” Though she said it mildly, Josie was pleased when the men flinched, including Elijah’s father. Yes,

she could make Elijah's life an absolute misery if she put her mind to it—and if he deserted her at their wedding brunch, she most certainly would.

Nodding, Evie's uncle took charge, sending Browne and Jones after Joseph, who had apparently left to chase after the delivery boy. The rest of them were left to circulate among the guests and keep up appearances, which Josie could tell grated on Elijah. She took a fair amount of joy in his frustration, which made her own emotions easier to deal with.

He had received a threat on his life. A threat!

Every part of her was wound up with indignation. No, she had not wanted to marry him, but she did not want to be a widow, either. She could not imagine a world without Elijah in it, and she did not want to. Right now, he was far safer here at the brunch, though he clearly did not appreciate that.

"Stop grinding your teeth, Elijah," she murmured as they walked away from the Spencers. "People will think you are unhappy to be married to me."

Rolling his shoulders back, some of the tension in his body dissipated, and a blander social mask settled over his expression. Josie was fascinated to watch the transformation as though now that he had been reminded of his role, he could slip it on like a second skin.

"My apologies." His voice was still tight with tension, though she doubted anyone who did not know him as well as she did would realize. "I am not used to being left behind while others take action for me."

"Hmm." She had absolutely no sympathy for him. "Perhaps you can compare feelings with Evie about what it's like when you see her again."

The dark look he shot down at her made her cackle inside.

Elijah

The wedding brunch was interminable, though he understood Father's reasoning. He had known he would eventually need to take on a more similar role to his father, standing back while others did the dangerous work, but he had not expected it to happen now. Although he could not deny it was the wiser course of action.

Seeing him and Josie walking around, her hand on his arm, the guests seemed to think nothing was amiss. If anyone noticed Joseph's absence, they said nothing—not to him and Josie nor in earshot of his father's men. Ending the brunch early or him leaving would have caused a flurry of unwanted gossip.

Joseph, Anthony, and Nathan returned by the end of the brunch to the notice of absolutely no one. From across the room, Joseph met Elijah's gaze and shook his head. They had been unable to find the delivery boy. Elijah cursed inwardly. Though he knew the result would have likely been the same if he had been the one to go, he still felt as if it was his fault they had missed another chance at the traitor.

Saying farewell to their guests, Elijah passed Josie over to the housekeeper, Mrs. Brandon's, care. She would show Josie the house while he met with the others to find out what happened.

"I see you still have no sympathy for those left out," Josie said, making a face at him. He almost expected her to stick out her tongue.

"You are the one who insisted we keep up appearances." He smiled benignly.

"I already know this house like the back of my hand."

Which was very likely true. She had been a regular visitor all Season, which had been both amusing and frustrating every time she had eavesdropped on him and Father. Knowing she was in contact with Evie, they had made a point to only talk about how worried they were about Evie in hopes Josie would pass the message on. However, her penchant for listening at keyholes had

hindered some of the discussions they needed to have. Father had chosen to allow it to continue, though now that Josie was Elijah's wife, he was determined to put a stop to it.

"But only as a guest, not as its mistress. You are now the lady of the house." The words gave him a pang as he realized how true they were. With his mother gone and Evie having disappeared—again—Josie was the only lady of the house. Her expression softened to one of sympathy. As his neighbor, she would remember his mother's death and funeral as well as he, though she had only been a young child when it happened.

"Well, as the lady of the house, I will expect to be kept informed. Eventually, you will have to tell me what was in that note." The tartness in her voice did not have the edge it might have. She turned to follow Mrs. Brandon without further protest. The housekeeper would show her their wing of Stuart House. Odd to think of it as 'their' wing, no longer 'his' wing.

Elijah kept his face blank. They would have time enough later to talk about what her duties as lady of the house would entail. They would *not* include hunting traitors or putting herself in any danger. He rubbed his hand over his chest, imagining himself in Rex's position a few weeks ago when Mary was kidnapped.

Of course, he was not in love with Josie, the way Rex was with Mary, but he cared about her greatly. He had grown up watching over her. It was nothing more than that.

"Elijah? Are you coming?" Jolted out of his reverie by Adam's question and realizing he'd been watching Josie's swishing skirts as she walked away, Elijah gave himself a little shake.

"Yes. I was... thinking." Turning on his heel, Elijah made a face when he caught sight of Adam's expression. He knew what his brother was thinking, but there was no way he would admit to Adam how attracted he now realized he was to Josie. He did not need to give his brother another reason to gloat.

Besides, his attraction to her had nothing to do with how she felt about him, which was a lowering thought.

“Come think with us. Though I am sure Josie’s skirts are very... thought-provoking,” Adam smirked. Ignoring him, Elijah strode into Father’s study.

Joseph was sitting in one of the chairs in front of Father’s desk, Nathan in the other, while Anthony paced by the window, occasionally glancing outside. Looking up when Elijah came in, Joseph grimaced in apology.

“The boy disappeared into the wind.” He sounded as weary and frustrated as Elijah felt. “We even asked some of the street boys if they knew who had delivered the letter, but none of them had any idea.”

Damn.

Coming up beside the chair, Elijah clapped Joseph on the shoulder.

“It was a slim chance you would find him. Thank you for trying.” Elijah turned his gaze to their father, who was watching them with fondness. “Now, what do we do?” Father’s countenance shifted to a more serious mien.

“We must take the threat seriously, although it is possible it is another distraction. I will set a man to watch you at all times.”

Elijah growled under his breath.

“I will not go about my business hemmed in by guards.” He hated to think his father thought he could not take care of himself.

“One guard. I would make such arrangements for anyone who had to go about in the public sphere. If you were on mission outside of Society, it would be different, but you will have social engagements ‘til the end of the Season.” Father’s expression did not change, and his tone brooked no argument. “It will be either Nathan or Anthony since they have the easiest time moving among the *ton*.”

Glancing at the two men, Elijah relaxed slightly. Not only did he consider them friends, but they knew his abilities. They would not stand in his way, and no one would think it odd to see them with him. There were only a few more weeks in the Season proper.

In two weeks, London would begin to empty out as the *ton* decamped to their estates.

“I will ask Rex to help out as well.”

“Rex? Why Rex?” Elijah was affronted. Anthony and Nathan guarding him were bad enough, but Rex? Rex was a good fighter, a crack shot, and a talented whip, but he was not a trained operative and had no experience guarding anyone.

Father raised his eyebrow.

“As a newly married man and the Earl of Durham, there will be some social gatherings you must attend where Anthony and Nathan would stand out. Rex has the same social standing and is also newly married. No one will blink twice to see him there, especially as Josie and Mary are such good friends.”

“Josie... Josie will need a guard as well.” Though she had not been threatened, she was still his wife. Elijah did not want to take any chances.

“I rather thought you might act in that capacity.” Father’s lips twitched in amusement, but his answer soothed some of the nervous tension gripping Elijah, reassuring his father did not think he was inept. “Though I am not concerned she is in any danger, currently. Whoever is behind this understands the reasons behind your marriage far more than the rest of the *ton*. They threatened to make her a widow but do not threaten her directly. Still, we will not be lax with her safety, and any time you cannot accompany her, I will ensure she has a guard.”

“It is too bad Evie is not here,” Adam murmured. “Guarding Josie would be the perfect job for her.” Father grimaced but did not argue or acknowledge Adam’s statement, though there was a large amount of truth to it. Elijah knew Father would want to keep Evie out of it.

He could not help but think of Josie’s jab earlier, about understanding how Evie felt being left out of things. Something to think on.

Chapter 9

Josie

She had not expected the house to feel different. Since the beginning of the Season, she had been inside its walls so often, Stuart House felt just as much her own as the house her parents had rented. Walking through with Mrs. Brandon, who pointed out the various furnishings, occasionally hinting where she thought something needed updating, felt *entirely* different. Mrs. Brandon had always been helpful when Josie visited, but she had never treated her with so much deference.

For the first time, Josie was walking through a home that was hers to do with as she pleased.

The mind boggled.

She had assisted her mother in their own home, back in Derbyshire but had never been able to do precisely what she wanted.

You still might not be able to. Elijah and his father will need to give you funds and approve of any changes you want to make.

Bother. What should she call Elijah's father now? As a child, she had called him 'my lord,' but after Evie had come to live with him, the girls had ended up teasingly calling him Uncle Oliver. Would it be awkward to continue doing so? Funny how she had never pondered such small things when she dreamed of marrying

Joseph.

“And this is your room,” Mrs. Brandon said with obvious relish as she opened the door. Josie walked inside, curious. The dust covers had been removed from the furniture, and the freshly polished, delicate wooden curves positively gleamed. The soothing pink rose hues of the tapestries on the walls complemented the darker pink of the bedding. Creamy curtains, edged with pink, were pulled away from the window seat, which was piled high with pink, cream, and sage green cushions, allowing plenty of light to flow into the room.

“Over here is the earl’s room,” Mrs. Brandon continued, not seeming to see Josie’s jolt of surprise when she realized Mrs. Brandon was talking about a door Josie had not previously noticed. Josie blushed deeply when she realized it was on the same wall as the bed.

Yes, she had known she and Elijah would have adjoining rooms, but it had not felt real until she saw the door betwixt them. Her body felt oddly tingly, and she shook her head to clear the sudden fuzziness of her mind, wiping damp palms on her skirt.

There was no reason to be nervous. Young ladies married men they did not want to all the time. It could be far worse. At least she liked Elijah, even if he was too bossy by far.

Her mother’s words about pleasure ran through her head, along with some of what Evie and Mary had told her. Josie blushed and turned away from the door. She would face doing *that* with Elijah when she had to and not a moment before. Her mind could barely comprehend it, to be truthful.

“We also have more tapestries, artwork, and furniture in the attic if you would like anything changed out,” Mrs. Brandon said earnestly, and Josie realized she had been staring around the room without answering the poor housekeeper, who had continued talking and appeared worried Josie did not like the room.

“Oh no, this is lovely. Wonderfully suited to me,” Josie said, smiling reassuringly at the older woman. Mrs. Brandon smiled

back, relieved. She had likely been the one to pick out the furnishings. Josie doubted Elijah had taken up the task. “I was so taken aback by how perfect it is, it rendered me speechless.”

“Good, good, I had hoped this would suit. I thought I had your style fairly well understood,” Mrs. Brandon replied, confirming Josie’s supposition. “We have similar furnishings back at Camden House, but it is very easy to change, and we can certainly accommodate anything you would like to bring with you from home.”

“There will be very little.” Stepping up to the beautiful four-poster bed, Josie tweaked the damask curtains. They were far prettier than what she had at home. Her family was well-to-do, especially after her grandfather had left her mother a good deal of money in his will, but they could hardly compete with a Marquess’ household.

“Your trunks arrived this morning and have been unpacked. Oh dear, it is almost time to start supper. Would you like to look at the menus for the week?”

“Yes, I suppose I should, thank you.” Josie cast one last look around the room—*her* room—before following Mrs. Brandon out the door. There was very little she wanted to change in here, but she would like to make some updates to the sitting room. It had clearly not been used for entertaining visitors in ages. That would give her something to speak with Elijah about over dinner.

Though... would they be having dinner with the rest of his family? Or would he want to dine alone?

Would Joseph be there?

She hoped not.

She wasn’t sure she wanted to dine alone with Elijah, not after seeing the door between their rooms. If they were alone, it would be so intimate. Josie shivered. The thought of being alone with Elijah, knowing what was coming... made her feel so odd. Her lips tingled with the memory of his kiss. She pressed them together as though that would make the sensation go away. It did not.

Elijah

Supper was simultaneously incredibly comfortable and extremely awkward. Josie had often dined at their table, but this was different. Thankfully, Joseph and Adam had gone to procure their own meals, taking some of the potential strife. He saw Josie relax when she came into the room to find only him and his father seated at the table.

Which made him bristle.

Despite knowing he was marrying a woman who was in love with one of his brothers, living with the reality was more difficult than he had thought it would be. He had thought the foreknowledge would keep it from bothering him, but he was quickly discovering he did not like knowing his wife was thinking of another man. Especially not his brother.

It did not matter that his wife was Josie or that he had not wanted to marry anyone, much less her. It did not matter. If he had decided to marry, she would never have topped his list of potential brides. What mattered was he had married her, and now he was feeling decidedly possessive.

Those emotions and his own temper made things awkward.

Yet it felt entirely natural to have her there, teasing his father and him, discussing the events of the day—though the events had been out of the ordinary. As if by silent arrangement, they didn't discuss the note Elijah had received, the traitor, or Evie, nothing that could be unpleasant or lead to an argument. To Elijah's relief, Josie did not ask where Joseph or Adam was. He did not need his unexpected jealousy pricked any further.

"I shall leave you to it," Father said, getting to his feet after finishing his meal. Elijah blinked in surprise, as they usually followed dinner with port. Father winked at him before turning to Josie. "Good night, my dear. It is truly a pleasure to welcome you to the family."

The sincerity in his voice was unmistakable, and Josie blinked rapidly as though she was about to tear up. Considering the circumstances, Father's warm welcome meant something to her.

"Thank you, Uncle Oliver." She beamed at him. Earlier, Father had told her she could continue to call him that, which, again, felt both comfortable yet awkward.

Though not nearly as awkward as being left alone at the table with Josie. Father left the room, and Josie stared down at her plate, shifting in her chair, seemingly at a loss for words—not at all her usual state of affairs—but then this was not the usual evening for them. It was up to him to take the lead, and Elijah felt a sense of calm settle over him.

Josie did not normally allow him to take command, but in this arena, he was the master, and she would be his student.

"My lady," he said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand. "I suggest we retire."

A hot blush filled her cheeks, turning them dark pink. She lifted her head but could not seem to make herself meet his eyes.

"I... yes, I suppose it is." Her voice was a little higher than normal, her breath coming a little faster. Elijah hid his grin at the evidence of her discomposure. It was rare anyone saw Josie knocked off her stride. Her chest rose, drawing attention to her breasts, as she took a deep breath and laid her fingers in his.

The surge of triumphant possessiveness and fiery attraction that slid through him was shocking in its intensity. Controlling himself, he led Josie on a sedate walk through the house but felt her feet starting to drag as they approached the bedroom. With a quick glance over his shoulder to ensure they were alone, he came to an abrupt halt.

Her head jerked up, eyes wide, not with fear, exactly, but certainly apprehension. Not the state of mind he wanted a woman in when he took her to bed, but at least she was meeting his gaze now.

"We do not have to do this tonight, Josie, if you would like

more time to accustom yourself to being my wife.” Despite his body’s urgent desire, there were so many factors that made this more difficult, and Elijah had no interest in a reluctant lover or worse, one that was wishing he was his brother. Perhaps it would be best to put this off until later.

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Josie

The gentleness in Elijah’s expression nearly undid her. Josie took a deep breath, blushing deeper when Elijah’s eyes dipped to her breasts, then back up again.

“No, I mean yes, I mean...” She took another breath as a small smile played on Elijah’s lips. She could feel him disengaging, stepping away emotionally, and she did not like it. Josie had every intention of doing her duty as his wife. More than that, she was naturally curious about that duty, especially after their kiss earlier.

She also could not stop her mind from worrying over her own part in things. While she had heard a great deal from Evie, then Mary’s cousin, Arabella, and Arabella’s friend, the Countess of Spencer, when Mary was the bride, then from Mary after she was married, Josie did not feel adequately prepared. Where did her hands go? Was she supposed to touch him? What, exactly, was she supposed to do with her tongue?

What if she was terrible at it?

Elijah had heaps of experience. Not only that, he did perverse, wicked things with the Society of Sin. What expectations would he have? She sincerely regretted revealing to him the extent of her knowledge earlier today. At the moment, she had enjoyed showing him she knew more than he thought, but now she worried he would expect more than she knew how to do.

“I do not want to be bad at it.” Josie raised her chin, though it felt like her cheeks were on fire. She had never been one to balk at a hurdle, nor was she very good at deception. “I want to do my

duty, but I also...” She let out her breath in a huff, narrowing her eyes at Elijah’s suddenly blank expression. He was laughing inwardly at her, she knew it, but she appreciated that he contained himself outwardly. “I know it is supposed to feel good. What if I make it feel bad?”

Now Elijah did laugh, and Josie scowled, reaching out to slap him on the shoulder. Before her palm could connect, he caught her wrist, using it to yank her against him, but not the way he would hold her for a dance—much, much closer. Her breath caught in her throat as her breasts pressed against his chest, her body crushed against the hard planes of his, his lips only inches away from hers and descending fast.

“Impossible. I will show you.”

He kissed her before she could respond, stealing her breath and reigniting the heat that he had kindled earlier.

Chapter 10

Elijah

Relief that Josie's hesitation had nothing to do with his brother was so strong, Elijah was almost weak from it. He was determined to keep things that way.

Josie was so confident in herself, it was easy to forget she did not like to try anything new under the view of someone else. Whether it was riding, archery, drawing, she practiced in private until she was competent. Only then did she seek out a teacher. Of course, that had been impossible in this sphere. Elijah would be her teacher from the beginning, and in doing so, he would wipe every thought of his brother from her mind.

Feeling her give way to his kiss, lips parting to receive him, supple body softening against his, Elijah backed her toward the door to her room. While there were no servants in the hall at the moment, he preferred not to be interrupted or seen. An audience had never bothered him in the past, but he did not know how Josie would react, and now that they had started, he was determined to finish.

Every part of his body was throbbing, aching. His cock dug into her soft stomach as his desire ran rampant through him. Elijah moved them into her room with only a small degree of difficulty, then began undoing the buttons along the back of her dress. Josie

gasped beneath his kiss, shivering as her dress parted.

Breaking from the kiss, Elijah moved his lips over her jaw, and her head automatically tilted back, giving him access to her neck. Her low moan encouraged him as her hands clutched his shoulders, keeping her balanced.

Though he might not have her heart, he had her body and her promise of faithfulness. Elijah would use those and his knowledge to seduce her to bind her to him. He did not question this sudden desire to claim Josie for his own. She was his wife now. He wanted her devotion and would want that regardless of who his wife was.

Josie

Utterly breathless, Josie whimpered as Elijah's hot mouth moved over her skin, stirring sensations she had never experienced. No mere kiss of the lips could ever match this—his hands moving over her body, his lips on the sensitive flesh of her throat, and the fabric of her dress slowly sagging as he undid the buttons holding it together.

She could barely think. When her dress dropped to a pool of fabric around her feet, exposing her chemise, corset, and drawers, she whimpered at the loss of a shield. Elijah's hands felt twice as intimate, moving over barely covered skin, and when his lips moved down her chest, she gasped. Fingers caressed her breast, deftly delving into her corset and pulling them up, exposing the nipple behind the thin fabric of her chemise. She grabbed his hair as his mouth closed around one turgid bud, suckling. Her knees went weak, and only his strong hands held her up.

Every part of her body was awash with sensation, on fire with a need she barely understood. She had tried to touch herself between her legs, and there had been times she had achieved some small pleasure, but even those times, she had not felt like *this*. Could anything quench the surge of heat and aching passion throbbing

through her?

Something hard pressed against the back of her legs, and Josie's lips formed a small 'o' of surprise. Elijah had backed her against the bed. Without speaking, he turned her around, so she was facing away from him, staring at the bed where he would soon divest her of her virginity. Something hard pressed against her buttocks, the ridge settling between her cheeks. *His cock*. That was what Evie and Mary had called it.

"Good girl." Elijah's warm breath moved over the back of her neck, making all the little hairs stand on end. "Put your hands on the bed."

In a daze, she obeyed. Not that she never followed Elijah's instructions, but she rarely did so without question if she even obeyed. Now, though... she felt as though she was in a dream, under his compulsion. Even though she could no longer see him, look at him, she was so acutely aware of him, it did not matter.

The corset loosened, and she sucked in a breath of shock. He was going to undress her entirely, leaving her completely exposed to him. For some reason, that sent excitement running along her skin, similar to her emotions when she was riding a particularly unruly horse, yet different. The danger was not the same, and neither would the end result be, but she had nothing else to compare to how her heart raced, her senses heightened, and everything else in the world melted away.

Hands moved over her, pushing her corset to the ground, pulling her chemise over her head, and caressing her bare skin. Eyes closed, Josie cried out in shock at the sensation of someone else's hands touching her so intimately, kindling a fire inside her that spread through her limbs, heating her blood.

Slightly bent over before him, she was shocked when his hot, bare body pressed against hers. When had he taken his clothes off? She did not have much time to concentrate on the question before his hands cupped her breasts, fingers pinching her nipples, his hot lips pressing against the back of her neck, the hard ridge of his

arousal sliding between her buttocks. Whimpering from the overwhelming rush of sensations, she squirmed, her hips pushing back against him, and Elijah groaned, his fingers tightening on her breasts.

“Up on the bed,” he growled in her ear, releasing her, and Josie obeyed, still feeling dazed. She turned onto her back, lying with her head on the pillow, eyes widening as she saw him fully naked for the first time.

They had grown up together in the country. She had seen all the Stuart brothers without their shirts at one point or another, even Adam once in his smallclothes when he had gone swimming in the nearby brook, but she had never seen any of them nude. Perhaps she had forgotten, or never really noticed, how splendid Elijah was, like a statue carved by one of the old masters but with a male appendage far larger and far more fearsome than any sculpture.

His eyes, hot, almost feverish, swept over her body, and she froze, staring back at him. She had been so distracted by his muscular build and broad shoulders, the sprinkling of dark hair across his chest and down his stomach, leading to the thick, erect cock which rose from its own thatch of curls, she had almost forgotten *she* was naked in front of a man for the first time.

Anxiety rose again, hard and fast. Though not enough to overpower her arousal, it diminished it. What was she supposed to do now?

As though he could sense her inner conflict, Elijah smiled reassuringly as he got on the bed and knelt at her feet. Her knees pressed together, but he took an ankle in each hand and pulled them apart, forcing her to expose herself to him. Josie whimpered when she felt the cool air on her wet netherlips. Every part of her tingled as Elijah ran his hands up her legs to her inner thighs, pushing them open even farther.

“Good girl,” he said, the warm accolade making her feel oh-so-very good again, in a manner she did not understand. “Do not

think, Josie. Just keep your eyes on me.”

His head dipped, his lips meeting her pussy, and Josie gasped aloud at the shocking, intensely pleasurable sensation of his tongue touching her there.

Elijah

Never before had Elijah cared if a woman had her eyes opened or closed while she was with him, but it now felt vitally important for Josie to watch him. To be intimately aware of who was touching her, pleasuring her. He did not, for a moment, want to worry that she was imagining his brother in his stead.

He could not see anyone but her, laid out before him like a sweet sacrifice to pleasure—utter perfection. His cock was hard as steel, aching to be buried between her thighs. Her hair was still piled high atop her head, like the lady she was, but she was naked and all his from those blonde locks to her pink-tipped nipples down to the blonde curls over her mound and the pink parts between her thighs to her delicate toes.

Holding himself back was exquisite agony, but he knew it would be worth it.

The slick cream from her pussy indicated her wetness, yet he wanted to take her further. She was unused to such pleasure, new to having someone touch her so intimately, and he would use that to his advantage. It was certainly something to keep in mind when they next argued. Heated and aroused, Josie was unusually compliant and obedient.

Adam’s words about her being more suited to him than to Joseph—since he would be able to take her in hand—ran through the back of his mind again. Though Elijah would have never described Josie as submissive, now he had to admit his brother had been on to something. He would have to ponder the implications later. Right now, he wanted his complete focus on his bride. His

wife.

Mine.

As the sweet flavor of her arousal exploded on his tongue, the possessive thought gripped him. He was the first man to taste her nectar, to feel her shudder, and hear her cry out in pleasure. Josie was his now. Though he had always felt protective, this emotion went far beyond that. He did not know how to handle it, so he pushed it aside and focused on her.

Her moans.

Her taste.

Her squirming movements.

Her fingers in his hair, tugging at him while she moved her hips, pressing her pussy against his lips as if he needed any further encouragement.

Cock pressed against the bedsheets beneath him, Elijah's tongue explored her soft crevices, her sensitive pink flesh while trying to ignore his own needs. Curling his arms under her thighs, his hands reached around to come over the top and spread her legs farther apart. He looked up the length of her body to see her still watching him, her eyes glazed with lust, her expression fascinated when their gazes met.

As soon as the connection was made, her cheeks blushed a very hot red, and Elijah moved his mouth up, tongue flicking over her clit. Josie cried out, body spasming, her back arching, but she looked back down at him, watching him between her thighs. Elijah stared at her as he sucked her clit into his mouth.

Nails dragged across his scalp, her grip tightening, completely worth every prickle of pain as she writhed in glorious climax.

Chapter II

Josie

The pleasure was agonizing. There was no other word for it.

Too much. It was too intense, far too much for a person to bear and stay sane, yet she could not find the words to beg Elijah to stop.

She did not want him to.

But she was sure she would die if he did not.

What came from her lips were moans and wordless cries. She clutched his head, her thighs trembling in his grasp. If she could have closed her legs against the relentless assault of ecstasy, she would have, but his hands held them firmly apart. When she met his gaze, his eyes were hot, filled with the dark flame of his own arousal. It was Elijah as she had never seen him, never imagined him.

Fingers pushed inside her, stretching her almost painfully, and she gasped at the rude intrusion. Her muscles clenched, making his fingers feel even larger inside her, yet the sensation was pure pleasure. The fingers moved, thrusting, eliciting another gasp. It felt so very odd yet so very right. She had craved this, even though she had never experienced it. It was far, far more pleasurable than when she had performed her own explorations.

Finding a particularly sensitive spot with his lips, he sucked,

and Josie screamed. Her back arched, toes curled, and tears slid from her eyes, trickling into her hair and the pillow beneath her head. It was a blissful torment, a pinnacle she tipped over, then she was falling, and falling, and falling, and he kept suckling. Waves of erotic rapture crashed over her, pummeling her senses, and she gasped for breath as the foreign sensations drowned her in their magnitude.

When Elijah finally released her from his lips, she slumped, swooning on the bed, limp and insensate. Nothing her friends had told her could have prepared her for such a devastating onslaught. She would have never believed them, even if they had been able to adequately explain.

Fingers sliding out of her, Elijah kissed his way up her stomach to her breasts, his lips moving over her so gently, so briefly, her skin shivered at his touch. She was so sensitized, even the mere brush of his lips was almost too much.

When he met her gaze again, his body settling between her thighs, something thick, hard, and heavy pressed at the entrance to her body, rubbing against her slick folds enticingly. Josie's breath caught in her throat. Despite the lassitude wreathing her limbs, her body came alive again with nervous tension. This was it.

"Who am I, Josie?" he asked, his lips hovering over hers.

"My husband?" Confused, unsure of the response he wanted, the words came out a question.

"My name, sweetheart."

"Elijah."

His dark eyes blazed, his body shifting atop hers. Pressing her hands against his chest, she could not look away as he shifted his hips and slid inside her. Far thicker than his fingers, he could not push in all the way. He moved slightly, then pulled away before thrusting in again a little deeper, claiming more space in her body. Wickedly intimate, she could not close her eyes, could not look away, as he breached her virgin entrance and buried himself inside her.

It hurt more than his fingers had but felt better. When he thrust a little harder, shoving more of himself inside her, she cried out, and his lips descended on hers. The sweet, salty taste unfamiliar, she realized she tasted herself on him. The utter perverseness of the act both aroused and repelled her, but there was no stopping him now.

His tongue invaded her mouth as determinedly as his cock invaded her pussy. She was full of him, her body surrounded by his limbs and torso and completely conquered by his mastery over her pleasure.

When he drew back, she cried out against his lips, her hands pressing against his chest, nails scratching over his skin as he moved against sensitive flesh. She was so wet, hot, and swollen, the pleasure was even more intense than what she had already experienced.

I cannot possibly take any more of this...

Yet when he thrust back in, his cock sliding into her wet sheath with ease, her hips rose to meet him, eagerly accepting his full length back inside her. It hurt wonderfully... if it hurt at all. Josie could no longer tell what she was feeling. The pain, the pleasure, were too closely linked together, leaving her awash with incomprehensible, overwhelming sensation.

Slow, steady thrusts, in and out of her body, were driving her wild again. Every time he filled her, his body pressed against the exquisitely sensitive spot, and her inner muscles clenched around him, building more pleasure deep within. The sensations were building to a climax again, and she could already tell it would be fuller, bigger, than the one she had already experienced.

She could only hang on to Elijah as though he could keep her from becoming lost in the sea of sensations that threatened to carry her away. All her life, he had been a rock, her rescuer, and now she clung to him rather than rejecting the security he represented.

Groaning, Elijah moved harder, faster, and Josie cried out as his passion spilled over onto her. Her legs wrapped around him,

opening herself farther as he spent his desire on her. As he grew larger inside her, she clamped down around him, sobbing as a another assault of ecstasy wracked her senses.

Her body tingled, small explosions of fireworks traveling from between her legs over her skin, sending her reeling. She felt as though she might swoon again, dizzy from the sheer ecstasy that soared through her. Something hot pulsed inside her, and she shuddered, clutching Elijah, feeling his weight pressing down on her, his low groans mingling with her shrill cries.

“Elijah,” she murmured in his ear with a sigh, relaxing beneath him as she felt him settle on top of her, both panting for breath in the afterglow of their consummation.

Elijah

Hearing his name as a sigh of pleasure on Josie’s lips affected him far more than he would have thought possible. Many women had moaned, screamed, and sighed his name, but it had never made him feel like this. Pure satisfaction, combined with a shocking possessiveness he had not thought himself capable of.

Was it their long history? The fact she was his wife? Or some combination thereof?

He did not know. Nor did he understand where the surge of affection, far stronger than he had ever felt for her, came from.

Sliding onto his side, he wrapped his arms around her, and Josie snuggled in. Of all the words he would use to describe Josie Pennyworth, ‘cuddly’ had never been one of them, but then, she was no longer Josie Pennyworth. She was Josie Stuart, Lady Josephina Stuart, Countess of Durham, and the future Marchioness of Camden. His wife.

“That was... lovely.” She rubbed her nose against his chest hair. Adorable. Sweet. Complacent. More words he had never thought he would use to describe Josie Pennyworth.

Josie Stuart, now. The reminder only increased his sense of gratification.

"I am glad you thought so," he murmured, absentmindedly stroking her hair. Josie sighed again, her arm wrapping around his waist and cuddling in his arms. They were so closely snuggled together, he could feel her falling asleep.

She muttered something about her mother, but he could not quite make out her words. Considering the one word he had understood, he was not sure he wanted to. Elijah stroked his fingers thru her hair. They had not even stopped to take it out of its pins, but he did not care. He had wanted her, and having her had done nothing to reduce the desire he felt for her.

Tonight had been nothing like he expected. It had been so much more. He had felt so much more.

Which was dangerous.

Though Josie knew about the Society of Sin, thanks to Mary, she could have no real concept of his darker desires. She was clearly a passionate young woman and perhaps more submissive than he had realized, but that did not mean she would be able to handle the Society's pastimes. Nor did he think she truly understood what he wanted from her, despite speaking to Mary.

He did not want to simply spank Josie, then fuck her. He wanted to tie her to his bed, turn her bottom a blistering red, then torment her by pushing her to the edge of orgasm over and over again until she was crying and begging for climax. He wanted to pinch her pink nipples, fig her to make her squirm while she was being spanked, and ride her into ecstatic oblivion.

He could only imagine Josie's expression were he to suggest any of this.

He was almost relieved he was still hunting for the traitor. While he did not particularly like the idea of betraying his marriage vows, no matter how popular the activity was among the *ton*, at least he would have some time to purge his needs while he remained part of the Society. Surely, by the time he finished his

mission, he would have had his fill of the perversities enjoyed by the members of the Society and would be content to cleave to his wife and no other.

Tightening his arms around her sleeping form, he promised himself he would be faithful to her in his heart—where she already had an unexpected place.

Which no one must know about.

The thought inserted itself so swiftly, so strongly, he was taken aback. On its heels was the confident certainty it was true.

Whoever the traitor was, they were watching him closely—watching his whole family closely—and had already sent him a threatening note. Unlike the rest of the *ton*, the traitor knew exactly what had transpired to cause Elijah to be the one to marry Josie. Where others saw the possibility of a love match or at least a match of passion, the traitor knew differently.

If the villain realized there was more than childhood affection or the protectiveness of a neighbor and a gentleman, Josie might be in danger. Elijah's blood ran cold. Bad enough that Evie had dragged her friends into the mix, the idea the reprobate might target Josie deliberately because Elijah cared about her...

He felt sick to his stomach at the very prospect.

Which was why he forced himself to unwrap his arms from around her, replacing the one under her head with a pillow. She grumbled softly in her sleep but did no more than sigh as he tucked the sheets around her to keep her warm.

Josie would sleep in her bed, and he would sleep in his. He did not like to think any of the servants might be working against his family, but in this case, even idle gossip could be precarious. To everyone else, he would need to appear to be a dutiful husband, but not one who demonstrated any deep emotions toward his wife. If the traitor thought Josie could be used against him...

No. That would not do at all.

Brushing a golden curl that had escaped her coiffure away from her cheek, Elijah bent down to brush his lips over the spot the curl

had laid, feeling oddly tender. With one last look, he blew out the candles and returned to his lonely bed, where he stared up at the ceiling, wondering how he was going to complete his mission and keep everyone safe.

Chapter 12

Josie

Waking up to an otherwise empty bed was an unpleasant surprise.

Even more unpleasant was discovering the mess she had made. Making a face at the sticky, flaky residue from last night's passion, she scooted across the mattress, away from the still damp spot.

"No one warned me about that," she muttered balefully, blinking her eyes in the morning light just as there was a knock on her door.

Elijah? Her heart leapt with excitement and anticipation before falling back down.

No, the knock had come from the hall door.

"Yes?" Her voice sounded a bit croaky, so she cleared her throat as the door opened to reveal her lady's maid, Debbie's sweet, happy face. It was odd to see Debbie here, in this house rather than her parents, but Josie was relieved to be faced with someone familiar first thing in the morning.

Truthfully, she had been expecting to see someone else familiar in her bed with her... Perhaps it was for the best. She had no idea what to say to him when she next saw him. A faint frown furrowed her brow. Perhaps a scolding for leaving such a mess for her to sleep in. Had he slept on the soiled sheets as well? She had no idea

when he had left her bed. They had fallen asleep together, which had been rather lovely. The entire evening had been lovely. Unexpectedly so.

“G’morning, miss, I mean, my lady.” Debbie’s apple cheeks turned pinker as she stumbled over Josie’s new honorific. She blushed even harder when she looked past Josie and saw the bed.

“Good morning,” Josie said, pretending she did not see the pink-tinged evidence of her defloration in the middle of the sheet for all to see. It would be far less embarrassing for both of them if they ignored it completely. Josie tucked the top sheet in more tightly around her body. Debbie had seen her nude before, but she was feeling particularly vulnerable at the moment.

Debbie seemed to be of the same mind. Bustling around the room, she opened the curtains, ignoring the bed for the moment. When she filled Josie’s washbasin, Josie used the cloth to clean herself of the sticky, flaky stuff between her legs, making a face as she did so. Really, why had no one told her about this part? She was a bit sore there as well, making the entire process rather uncomfortable.

Her mother had wanted to go into detail about pleasure but not mention *this*? To be fair, maybe her mother would have gotten around to it, but Josie had not been able to bear listening to her. Mary and Evie, though! They should have said something. Or Mary’s cousin, Arabella and her friend, the Countess of Spencer, when they had been advising Mary.

But no, they had talked about spankings, passion, and how pain could become pleasure—which had all been very fascinating but not practical.

Except... Josie frowned. It should be practical for her, should it not? Elijah was a member of the Society of Sin, and while much of last night’s physical revelations had felt sinful, he had not done many of the things the others had talked about. No spankings, certainly no whippings. Nothing to cause her discomfort or the painful pleasure that Mary had lauded.

Of course, she was not disappointed in the great pleasure she had felt, the things he had done to her, but what did it mean that he had not done the more perverse things?

Perhaps because it was your first night doing anything, you little tart.

“My lady? Did you want a different dress?” Debbie asked worriedly. Josie gave herself a shake, realizing she was frowning at the pretty apple-green day dress Debbie had picked out for her, one of Josie’s favorites. No wonder Debbie was concerned.

“No, no, I am sorry, Debbie, my mind was on other things.”

“Oh.” Debbie gave a little laugh, her cheeks pinking again. “Yes, I daresay it was.”

Blushing, Josie dressed, with Debbie’s help, then sat in front of the mirror, blinking and making a shocked noise when she realized a mess her hair was. She had forgotten to take it down last night, and the resulting bird’s nest was startling. Perhaps she should be glad Elijah had *not* been present this morning to see her like this.

Debbie did the delicate work of finding all the pins and brushing Josie’s hair into soft waves before plaiting it and pinning it in a much simpler style. Josie’s mind wandered, still wondering about Elijah’s absence and the lack of wickedness on their wedding night. Perhaps he had refrained because she was a virgin? Josie did not like the idea of him denying himself. And Elijah was certainly the type to sacrifice his own needs if he thought it necessary. Admittedly, she was nervous about engaging in such activities, but she was also very, very curious. With her newfound experience, that curiosity had doubled, becoming like an itch she could not scratch.

She needed Elijah to scratch it.

When Debbie finished, Josie made her way down to the dining room to break her fast, hoping she would find her husband there, but the only people in the room were Uncle Oliver and Joseph.

She had not thought of Joseph once all morning.

The revelation made her stomach swoop, and she was decidedly

uncomfortable. Was her heart truly so fickle? Was she so inconstant? She did not have time to ponder the thought. Both men got to their feet with welcoming smiles. If Joseph's was a trifle strained, she decided to ignore it.

"Good morning," she said, smiling widely, her expression a bit strained as well. "Is Elijah about?" Perhaps it was only her imagination, but she thought Joseph might have relaxed at her words, making her feel a bit miffed. And hurt.

She would not have been such a bad prospect for marriage, would she? Except he was in love with Miss Bliss. It hurt less than it had, although she was not sure she liked that knowledge. Were her emotions so capricious, they could easily switch between brothers? She did not like that, even though it would make everything easier. More than one person in London had called her flighty, and this seemed to prove it. Josie did not like that at all. She did not consider herself a faithless person, yet that was exactly what this felt like.

"No, he had some things he had to do this morning," Uncle Oliver said apologetically, though he did not sound particularly censorious toward Elijah, which meant he thought it was important. Josie pressed her lips together to keep from asking what could be so important the day after his wedding. She already knew the answer. He was off doing something about the traitor they were all hunting, the one responsible for said wedding.

Sitting, she hid her conflicted emotions and smiled graciously at the two men as they took their seats.

"He did leave a note for you." Joseph half-turned to signal one of the footmen who left the room. Returning as another footman scooped eggs onto Josie's plate, he handed her a piece of paper. A flutter went through her stomach as she opened it, even though she knew it would hardly be a love note. There went her emotions again, wishing it would be.

Josie,

I am sorry I was unable to break your fast with you, but there are

serious matters I must attend to. Hopefully, after the Season is over, we will be able to take some sort of honeymoon.

Yours,

Elijah

Yes, hardly a love note. She should not feel so let down, but she could not help inwardly sighing. They were married. Last night had been wildly passionate, and this morning, she had gone so far as to forget her feelings for Joseph—the only man she had wanted to see was Elijah. Was it too much to ask that he felt a bit of the same for her?

END

Elijah

The house on Jermyn Street Nathan and Anthony shared was a comfortable bachelor pad. Former military, both of them were tidy, and unlike some of the residences along the infamous street, there were hardly any signs of debauchery or licentiousness. As the houses on the street were entirely filled with single men, often that was not the case.

Settled into one of the large, leather wingback chairs in their study, Elijah gritted his teeth in frustration. He was hoping they would have better news for him. Though he had not expected to be able to hunt down the boy who delivered the note yesterday, he *had* hoped they would be further along in finding out who had set Josie up at the Sterlings' ball.

"Every member of the French delegation's whereabouts is confirmed," Nathan said tiredly, rubbing his hand through his hair and ruffling it almost comically. "They were all at Richmond House the entire evening. Not one of them attended the Sterlings' engagement."

"That is not possible unless we have a random French lord wandering in and out of ballrooms." Elijah banged his fist on the arm of his chair.

“Perhaps someone affecting a French accent?” Anthony suggested.

“They would still have had to gain entry to the ball or if they snuck in, manage to blend into the crowd.” Elijah shook his head. Despite the crush, an interloper would not have an easy time of it. The *ton* was large, but it was also full of busybodies and gossips, who knew every single person’s name, titles, and likely, their measurements as well.

“It is a puzzle,” Nathan allowed. He grimaced, shooting a glance at Elijah. There was an odd look in his dark eyes, and his hair was becoming increasingly rumpled from the number of times he had run his hands through it, emphasizing his disquiet. Normally he was the most ordered out of the three of them. “How much do you know of your new wife’s friends?”

That was certainly not the tack Elijah had expected Nathan to take. Tilting his head in question, he let curiosity trickle into his voice.

“I grew up with all of them as neighbors. Why?”

Nathan pressed his lips together, and Anthony averted his gaze when Elijah looked at him. Whatever was troubling Nathan, Anthony already knew and felt it would upset Elijah. As Anthony tended to be the more brash and outspoken of his two friends, that was particularly troubling.

“I do not wish to cast aspersions—” Nathan started to say carefully, and Elijah made a cutting motion with his hand.

“Out with it, man. I do not have the patience for this today.” With everything they had reported, he was not eager to get back to his father and relay the lack of new information, but he *did* want to check on Josie. See how she was this morning. How she felt about him after last night. If she had seen Joseph and how she felt about *him* this morning, though he could not actually ask her. Hopefully, she was not thinking of his brother at all. Elijah feared that might not be the case, but he could hardly question her without making her think of Joseph.

Yes, he needed to get home, which meant Nathan needed to stop prevaricating. He pinned his friend with a hard glance, one that he had learned from his father. To his pleasure, it had a similar effect.

“Remember you asked me to organize an effort to monitor the correspondence going to and from the delegations?” Nathan’s voice was still wary, but at least he was speaking. Elijah nodded. Nathan had a vast number of acquaintances from all walks of life and was particularly good at winning people over to helping him. “One of the members of the French delegation, the *Vicomte* de Gaul, received a letter about Miss Davies earlier this Season. A member of their Parliament wrote to him and requested he make her acquaintance and deliver a gift to her.”

Elijah frowned, torn by conflicting emotions. On the one hand, he wanted to defend Lily. She had been the easiest of his neighbors and Evie’s friends, a bookish bluestocking, the quietest of the four young ladies, and the least likely to be involved in any sort of trouble. On the other hand, because of her reticence, she was also the one he knew the least. If someone were to target those close to the Stuart household, she would be an ideal candidate...

No. He shook his head. He would not believe it. Unfortunately, he knew very well ‘would not’ and ‘could not’ were two entirely different things.

“Do we know what the gift is and if it has been delivered?” he asked, fixing on the one physical point he could.

“No. It was being sent soon, though the letter did not say what it is or why its delivery was delayed.” Nathan’s jaw clenched and unclenched. In the third chair, Anthony quietly sighed and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. He did not enjoy the behind-the-scenes machinations and scheming. They often joked Elijah was the commander, Nathan the advisor, and Anthony the gun they pointed once they knew where to aim.

“Keep an eye out. I do not believe Lily would knowingly be involved in anything nefarious, but I cannot discount she might be

used unwittingly.” Elijah gave Nathan a stern look when he stirred as though he wanted to say something, and Nathan looked away first. Elijah truly did believe Lily would ever purposefully betray her country. Nathan clearly did not, but Nathan had not grown up next to her. “If that is all, I must be going.”

“Back to your bride?” Anthony asked, amused. “I am impressed you were able to sneak away the day after your wedding.”

Elijah shrugged. “We do not have the usual kind of marriage.”

Nathan and Anthony exchanged glances, which Elijah chose to ignore. He was surrounded by know-it-alls, so he had plenty of practice. It was far more important to return home to Josie than argue with them.

Especially since he had the unsettling feeling, they were far more aware of his emotions toward his new bride than he was comfortable with.

Chapter 13

Josie

Although she had not planned to leave Stuart house on her first full day as its lady, when Elijah had not reappeared after she finished eating, she decided to visit Mary. She had a few questions for her friend about the marital act and the Society of Sin. Also, she liked the idea of Elijah returning home to find *her* absent.

She was not the type to cool her heels, waiting for her husband to reappear. Even if whatever he was dealing with was a dire mission for the Crown, what was doing that could not have been done by his father or his brother? Sniffing derisively, she made her way up to the door of Hartford house, Debbie trailing behind her.

At least Elijah would not have to wonder where she had gone. Delicately questioning Uncle Oliver and Joseph about Elijah's whereabouts had gotten her nowhere, whereas they both knew who she was visiting.

Cormack, Rex's butler, opened the door and blinked in surprise. It was too early for Mary to be at-home, but he knew very well that Josie and Lily were welcome whenever and they often visited outside of Mary's receiving hours.

"Good morning, my lady. Please come this way, and I will fetch the Marchioness for you." Cormack had always been proper with Josie and Lily, but it did feel as though there was an extra touch of

deference to his address this morning. Bemused, Josie followed him into the drawing room, where she sat on the couch while he hurried off to fetch Mary. Debbie sat on a bench in the hall since there was no reason for her to act as a chaperone.

It did not take long for Mary to arrive. Josie blinked in surprise at her friend's appearance before grimacing in chagrin at the concern on Mary's face. She was wearing a green silk robe rather than a dress, and her hair was undone, hanging in waves around her shoulders. Clearly, she had rushed through her toilette because she thought Josie had a dire need for her. Which, considering Josie had appeared on Mary's doorstep the day after her wedding, instead of home with her new husband, was completely understandable. Josie had not thought about what assumption her friend might make.

"What is wrong?" Mary asked, her voice higher than usual, and at the same time, Josie jumped to her feet and spoke.

"Nothing is wrong!"

They stared at each other for a moment, then Mary threw her hands in the air with sheer exasperation.

"Then why are you here?!" Cheeks bright pink, she had a feverish flush to her face and eyes, and Josie had never heard her sound like that. Josie's mouth dropped open in shock, and Mary shook her head, wringing her hands. "I am sorry, I am..." Her voice trailed off like she was searching for the words. Josie had the sudden realization why Mary was wearing a robe, and her hair was *dishabille*.

"Oh, my... I am so sorry." Josie's hands flew to her cheeks. "I did not realize... I had not..."

"No, no, it is fine. Well, not fine, and Rex might hold a grudge for the interruption." Mary's sense of humor had reasserted itself, and her eyes sparkled in amusement as she moved toward Josie, gesturing for her to sit back down. "Clearly, something is wrong, or you would not be here right now. So, why are you here instead of home with your new husband?"

Despite her calmer tone, Mary gave Josie a look that said something had better be wrong for Josie to interrupt what she was fairly certain Rex and Mary had been doing. Feeling even more disgruntled—why had Elijah not wanted to do that with her this morning—Josie flopped down onto the couch, not caring how she rumpled her skirts.

“Because my new husband is not at home,” she said acerbically. Mary’s eyes widened. “He is ‘off doing business,’ according to Uncle Oliver.” Josie snorted.

“What business could they need *him* to do specifically on the day after his wedding?” Mary scowled in indignation, echoing Josie’s feelings, making her feel marginally better. It had been infuriating both Uncle Oliver’s and Joseph’s attitudes had been sympathetic but ultimately unmoved.

“Your guess is as good as mine. Neither of them felt the need to tell me.” At Mary’s outraged sound, Josie felt a bit calmer now she had someone on her side. “So, I decided to come here as I had some questions for you, anyway.”

A little smile curved Mary’s lips.

“This way, when Elijah comes home, he will have to wait for you instead of the other way round.” Mary shook her head. With a little laugh, she settled back in her seat on the couch, adjusting her robe over her legs before running her hands through her hair and braiding it to keep it out of her face. “Well, what did you wanted to ask?”

“Does Hartford sleep in your bed?” That was not what she meant to ask. She had meant to ask about how to keep from having such a mess after the marital act and what she might expect from Elijah when it came to the perversities the Society practiced, but knowing she had interrupted Mary and Hartford engaging in the marital act in the morning had thrown her off.

“No, I sleep in his.” Mary cocked her head, reading Josie’s expression, and sudden sympathy filled her eyes. “But that is not the usual arrangement, among our set.”

“No, I suppose not.” Josie knew her parents had their own separate rooms, of course, but she did not know their sleeping arrangements. She had never thought to ask. Falling asleep in Elijah’s arms last night had been very nice. Despite the bird’s nest, her hair had been this morning, she thought she would have liked to have woken up, held by him.

Most couples among the *ton* were not close, she knew. They did not wed for love. She had not wed for it either, of course, but... She averted her thoughts from the uncomfortable notion.

She would like her marriage to have love in it—when for so long she had been in love with Joseph... Josie shook her head. She was just making the best of her future. Of course, she wanted a happy, loving marriage. She wanted to be happy, regardless of which man she had married.

What did Elijah want?

She had no idea.

“Good morning, Josie.” Rex came striding into the room. Unlike Mary, he had taken the time to dress, but Josie still blushed when she looked at him. There was a grumble to his greeting, despite his effort to sound cheery.

“Good morning. I am so sorry to be an inconvenience.” Josie grimaced. “Perhaps I should have gone to Lily’s, but...”

“No, no, it was best you came here,” Mary reassured her. By his expression, her husband did not agree, but he did not dispute her statement. “Lily’s parents and godparents would have been about, and it is not as if Lily can answer questions about lovemaking, even if they were not present.”

“You are here with questions about lovemaking?” Rex’s expression went abruptly from disgruntled to sheer mischief, and he straightened his stance. “Was Elijah not good with his explanations?” His blue eyes snapped with glee that made Josie giggle, despite the circumstances.

“Well, he left this morning before I could ask him anything.” There was no keeping the unhappiness out of her voice. The more

she thought about it, the angrier she got.

“Twit.” Rex shook his head. Again, like with Mary, his agreement of her assessment helped to cool her temper. “If you have any questions, you should come to the Society of Sin soiree at Lady Greywood’s tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Josie’s eyes widened. “I can come?” That was most unexpected. Even knowing the circumstances behind it, Rex seemed to take her marriage to Elijah as an indication she would want to attend an event.

And do you not?

Of course, she did. She was curious.

“Yes.” Rex shook his head. “As far as I know, Elijah is planning to attend. You are invited as well—with or without him.”

Oh, Elijah was planning on attending, was he? Josie’s temper flared far brighter and higher than ever. That... that... twitty twit! Her chin lifted.

“I will be there.”

Elijah

Returning home, Elijah did not know if he was more relieved or peeved to discover Josie had gone to Hartford House. Knowing how active she was, he was not at all surprised she had refused to stay home, even though she should have been learning the ropes of the house. On the other hand, when he checked in with Mrs. Brandon, she seemed well content with the direction Josie had given her before leaving. Which did not make him feel any better.

He should have gone about his day, but after checking in with his father and relaying Nathan and Anthony’s information, he found himself hanging around the front room, spying out the window for a flash of blonde locks. So, he saw Josie when she returned home, her lady’s maid trailing just behind her with several packages. Gritting his teeth, he realized she must have gone

shopping. Though what for, he could not imagine.

Bounding into the foyer, he came to an abrupt halt when Josie entered, blinking in surprise to see him.

“Ah, there you are,” she said as if she was the one who had been left waiting for him to return. Technically, she had been earlier this morning, but now it was midafternoon. He had returned long before she had. “I hope your business was completed successfully?” A delicately arched eyebrow skewered him.

“Yes.” The feeling of being wrong-footed when he had come home before her did not sit well, but it did remind him he had been the first to leave the house this morning. Likely, she would not have left if he had not. “Did you enjoy your visit with Mary?”

“Always.” Her smile was dazzling. “If you will excuse me, I must put away my purchases.”

“What did you get?” Asking felt odd, but he was the one now paying for her extravagances. The dazzling smile became enigmatic as her chin lifted in challenge. One that made his palm itch... but to caress or spank?

“Some things for me. I will show you later.” Her tone was tart and left no room for argument.

Assuming this was part of his punishment for leaving her on their wedding morning, Elijah did not protest as she waved her hand, effectively dismissing him before heading upstairs. Watching her go, he did not even realize he was staring after her until she disappeared from sight, and he was still standing there like a fool. Shaking himself, he hied off to his study.

Interrupting his day to take his new wife to bed would certainly cause the servants to gossip, which risked getting back to the traitor. He needed to keep his distance from Josie strictly within the bounds of propriety, even now that they were married, at least until his mission was complete. Thankfully, she should expect no less since theirs was not a love match.

Why, then, did it make him so deuced uncomfortable?

Chapter 14

Elijah

Josie was still annoyed with him, though she was pretending not to be.

She would not fully meet his eyes over the dining room table. Her gaze glanced over him, dismissing him in that quiet way she had, the manner she had often employed once she had become old enough to realize how it grated on him. Unlike previous times, she still smiled and spoke to him as if she was not ignoring him, but he keenly felt the lack of her eye contact.

Especially since she looked directly at his father and brothers when she spoke to them, including Joseph. Which made him grit his teeth, even though she did not look at Joseph any more often than she did the other two. Thankfully. If she had, he did not think he would have been able to contain his reaction.

The rest of his family knew both of them well enough to pick up on the undercurrents. Joseph responded by withdrawing from the conversation and focusing on his food, Father did his best to keep the conversation engaging but inoffensive, and Adam decided to tell Josie stories the times Elijah had gotten into trouble.

“A goat? He stole a goat?” Josie’s eyes danced with mischief, though they were completely focused on Adam, and she did not even glance at Elijah. “I do not believe you.”

“Oh, yes. Stole it and delivered it to his professor’s office, where it ate everyone’s end-of-term papers.” Adam chuckled heartily, ignoring his eldest brother’s glare. Elijah wished they were seated a little closer, so he could give his youngest brother a kick under the table. He did not need his exploits repeated to his already willful and wild wife. This was going to come back to bite him.

“No one could prove who it was,” he retorted, pretending to be affronted when in reality, he was fighting back a grin at the memory.

It had been him, of course, as well as Rex, Lucas, and several other friends he had lost touch with over the years. Elijah had been the one who had done the actual stealing, but it had been Rex’s idea. Professor Pince had not been well-liked.

Elijah would never admit it, especially not in front of Josie.

Adam winked at her.

“Not denying it, is he?”

“Enough tormenting your brother,” Father interjected with an amused smile as Elijah bristled. “What is everyone doing tonight?”

“Josie and I are staying in.” It would be expected since their wedding had been yesterday. In a few days, they would rejoin the ton’s end-of-Season activities, giving everyone a good look at them before the departure from London commenced. It also would give Elijah some time to search for their elusive Frenchman the next few evenings.

To do something.

Tomorrow he would also attend the Society of Sin’s gathering. Lurking to see if there were any other traitors in their midst and questioning the rest of the members about their conversation with Collins, hoping they might know something. So far, none of them had been informed why Collins had disappeared, and the Earl of Carlisle had retreated back to his estates.

“I am joining some of my friends at Gentleman Jim’s.” Adam leaned back in his seat. As the youngest son and the least

interested in the marriage mart, he was able to eschew the *ton's* regular amusements. Unlike Elijah, who would have to do the pretty with Josie until the end of the Season or invite all sorts of gossip, he would not countenance.

"And you, Joseph?" Father asked when Joseph did not immediately chime in. He jumped slightly in his chair as though he had been lost in thought.

"I am escorting... I mean, I am going to the Brockman's ball tonight." Joseph looked straight at Father as he abruptly changed what he was saying midsentence, yet he might as well have stared straight at Josie rather than avoiding her gaze completely. Now, Josie was not looking at Elijah or Joseph. Her expression was completely blank.

They all knew Joseph had been about to say he was escorting Miss Bliss to the Brockmans. Elijah ground his back teeth, watching his wife carefully. Did it hurt her to hear? It must, even after their wedding and last night's passionate consummation.

Which hurt him.

He hated to acknowledge the truth, but there was no denying it.

Knowing there was a part of her that still had feelings for Joseph felt as if someone had stabbed him through the chest.

Bloody hell.

"Wonderful," Father said with false cheer, probably wishing he had not asked. The air was tense around them, the awkwardness hanging like a sodden aura. "Well. Who would care for some port?"

Josie

After an exceedingly awkward end to dinner, everyone decamped, including her and Elijah. He took himself off to his study—again—leaving her to wander the house. Thinking about

him. Thinking about Joseph.

Oddly, she had not thought about Joseph all day, not until she realized he was escorting Miss Bliss tonight. It had not hurt, but she did not know how she felt. How she was supposed to feel.

Sadness had been her first thought, but not the sadness of heartbreak. It was more like grief, yet not grief over Joseph. Grief over the dream she had held on to for so long. How lowering to realize her emotions had not been engaged in the manner she thought. Lowering, yet... freeing because she had *not* married him.

It would have been awful to have wed him, only to find her love for him was not what she thought it was.

Wandering to the foyer, she came to an abrupt halt when a man she did not recognize was standing there. He turned to face her. His clothing was well kept, though not expensive enough to be that of a lord's, but the brazen way he ran his eyes over her showed he still had the arrogance of one.

"My lady." He bowed, but there was something off about both the movement and his expression as if he was making a mockery of the genuflection. "Congratulations upon your wedding."

Josie stiffened. The slyness in his voice made it clear he knew how insulting he was being. Polite society did not offer the bride congratulations. It was not said out of ignorance. He was insinuating she was a fortune or title hunter, one who had won the game, which was the only reason to choose that particular phrase.

"Thank you," she replied coolly, lifting her nose and eying him like the slimy worm he was. Though he was rather attractive in a way, his manner made her skin crawl. "And you are?"

"Mitchell!" Elijah's voice barked out loudly, with a faint echo as it bounced off the floor and ceiling. Turning her head, Josie watched her husband stride down the hall, a storm cloud expression on his face. The kind of expression he got when she and Evie had really and truly stepped in it. He might have said the man's name, but his eyes—his glare—were directed at her.

Josie bristled. Why was he glaring at her? She glared back, her

temper already sparking. There were plenty of pent-up emotions from the day to fuel her—him leaving her bed first thing in the morning, not once mentioning the Society of Sin's event tomorrow, and now glaring at her for no reason. It seemed he was not happy to see this man in the foyer, but that was hardly her fault, now was it?

To her surprise, Elijah averted his gaze, transferring his glare to the man, who seemed to shrivel a little.

"Who let you in, Mitchell?"

"I let myself in." The man shrugged insouciantly. "I did not think it would be a problem. It never has been in the past."

There was no mistaking the unhappy expression on Elijah's face.

"Do not do so again. Father and I will be changing the protocol. He is in his study. I will meet you there."

Mitchell gave another sardonic bow, this one directed to Elijah, before glancing at Josie and giving her another half bow. Coming down the last few stairs, Elijah stood between them, cutting off her view with his broad back to her. She could hear Mitchell's footsteps moving down the hall, away from them and toward Uncle Oliver's study.

Only then did Elijah turn around to face her. She was waiting, with arms crossed over her chest, one foot tapping impatiently, and an eyebrow arched. Not that her clear displeasure had any effect on him.

"Stay away from Mitchell," he ordered, in the bossy tone that had always driven her up the wall.

"Why?" Not that she wanted to spend any time with the man, but she did not like Elijah ordering her around without explanation.

"He is no gentleman." The stiff manner of his statement had her suspicions rising even more.

"In what way?"

"Dammit, Josie, can you not just do what I say for once?"

“No.” She snorted. “Not without good reason.” He did not need to know she had no interest in being anywhere near this ‘Mitchell.’ Josie did not appreciate his high-handed orders without explanation and would not bow to them. If that was the kind of woman he wanted, he would have done better to court Miss Bliss, like his brother.

“Just stay away from him.” Rather than giving her a satisfactory answer, Elijah turned on his heel and followed Mitchell down the hall. He glanced over his shoulder. “And no eavesdropping!”

Pressing her lips together, Josie whirled and stomped up the stairs, not caring how childish it was. Elijah was determined to cut her out of everything. This evening, she would entertain herself, and tomorrow evening, she would join the Society of Sin for the first time. See what he made of that! Ha!

Elijah

Hearing Josie’s tantrum all the way up the stairs, Elijah rubbed his palm against his thigh. The urge to go after her and spank some sense—and respect—into her sassy bottom was growing stronger by the minute, which was why he had had to turn heel and retreat. He could not just throw his new wife over his knee and spank her.

Why not?

Ignoring the insidious little voice, he continued down the hall. He should be wondering why Mitchell was here, but all he could think about was seeing Mitchell eyeing Josie. She was beautiful this evening, despite being dressed to stay in. If anything, the simple green gown was even more appealing than some of the more elaborate ballgowns.

Certainly, it would be easier to take off her.

If she allowed him to after that little scene. Perhaps it would be better to eschew visiting her bed chambers tonight. The idea of

going from her bed tonight to the Society of Sin's gathering tomorrow... well, it did not feel right. Better to stay away from her bed this evening. Not only was she cross with him, but it would help damp down any possible gossip from the servants about their feelings for each other, and he would not feel as though he was hopping bedsheets.

The small tiff in the foyer would also help stomp on any gossip about a possible love match between them. It was more like business as always, which was unfortunate. Elijah was not going to explain himself to her, though. Mitchell's unsavory nature was not fit for a lady's ears, and Josie should trust him to guard her best interests. Why could she not follow directions?

"Mitchell, what brings you here?" Father asked as Elijah slipped through the door. Rather than closing it all the way, he left it cracked open, allowing him to see down the hall. If Josie came back down to listen to their conversation, he would see her approach. He leaned against the door, watching the hall as he listened.

"Rumors, my lord," Mitchell said, seating himself in one of the chairs in front of Father's desk. "Rumors of a Frenchman who came over with the delegation but is not part of the delegation. Supposedly, he disappeared after they disembarked from their ship and has been seen in the Warrens."

The Warrens were one of the worst parts of London. The streets were ruled by the most vicious denizens of the underground, many of who had built wealth through nefarious means or the gaming hells they ran. Ladies never stepped foot there, and only those lords who were there to gamble dared venture forth.

"Do you have confirmation?" Father asked, sitting up with interest. If there was a Frenchman who had broken off from the main group and was now lurking in the Warrens, there was a good chance he was the one who had set up Josie at the ball.

"Not yet, but I am working on it." Mitchell sounded very pleased with himself, as well he should. This might be their first

break. Elijah might not like Mitchell, but he had his uses.

Chapter 15

Josie

Elijah had not come to her room last night. She had waited and waited, wearing a lovely nightgown with lace over her bosom, intended to titillate, until she heard him return to his room. Listening to him moving around—albeit quietly—until there was silence. Then scowled when she realized he was not coming in.

Why not?

Had he worried she would question him about that Mitchell person? She had known better than to eavesdrop after he had told her not to. He would have been watching out for her presence, so she had stayed away. But she was burning with curiosity. Still, was that enough reason for him to eschew her bed? Josie scowled at her reflection in the mirror as Debbie did her hair. She did not think so.

Or, perhaps, he had only come to her bed that first night because it was expected? To consummate the marriage.

Something twisted in her stomach. Tonight, the Society of Sin gathered. Was Elijah going? Was he planning to hide that from her?

Was he going there to be with another woman?

The very idea he might be waiting to be with another woman, to touch her the way he had touched Josie, to pleasure her... made

her want to scream and rage, then cry. Far more so than when she thought about Joseph with Miss Bliss. She could hardly deny her feelings for Elijah had changed, even if it was only the desire of a wife to have a loyal husband. She felt possessive. That was all. She had never expected Joseph to be faithful to her, only hoped he would return her feelings, but she had never expected Elijah to be untrue, no matter how common it was among the *ton*.

"My lady? Are you well?" Debbie's concern reminded Josie she was not unobserved.

"Yes, I am fine, thank you. Hungry," Josie tacked on. Debbie had been with her long enough to know she was a bear when she was hungry. The fashion was for ladies to be circumspect about eating, but for Josie, it had been a choice between unfashionably feasting or growling at the rest of society. Her mother had always chosen to let her eat.

She was rather peckish, which was certainly not helping her mood. When Debbie finished with her hair, Josie made her way down to the dining room, where she was pleased to see her husband in attendance this morning. He looked up from the paper he was reading when she came in. It was just the two of them.

"Good morning." He stood, watching as she moved to her seat, his expression unfathomable. A lock of dark hair curled over his brow, and Josie's fingers itched to brush it back—to touch him at all—but he held himself in place, so she did not approach, choosing the chair across from him and sat with the footman's assistance.

"Good morning." There was a tartness to her tone she could not hide, but she ignored the questioning look Elijah sent her. "I hope you slept well."

"Well enough." The silence hung awkwardly about them as they stared at each other across the table. He cleared his throat. "Do you have any plans for today?"

"I had not thought about it," she said slowly. "Do you?"

"I will be engaged for most of today," he replied apologetically.

“Though I could take you around Hyde Park this afternoon if you wish.”

Hyde Park, where the gossiping matrons would be gathered. They would expect to see Elijah and Josie there at the fashionable hour eventually, and today was as good a day as any. Tomorrow, Josie would be returning to the daytime social rounds, including a tea at Lady Jersey’s, which she could not miss.

“That would be nice. And this evening?”

Elijah didn’t blink.

“I have some business to attend to this evening.” He smiled patronizingly. “Do not worry, we can make our return to society tomorrow at Manchester House.” One of the more important events of the Season, it was not to be missed. The Duke and Duchess of Manchester were powerhouses among the *ton*. The duke’s sister was also Josie’s friend, Mary’s cousin, giving her an additional connection to the family.

Josie had not been looking for reassurance they would not miss one of the premier events of the Season. She had wanted to know if Elijah planned on attending the soiree at Lady Greywood’s tonight.

If he was still planning to attend, he was not inviting her along.

Just as well, she had her own invitation. A kind of quiet fury built in her chest. She could not wait to see the look on his face when he realized she was welcome within the Society, whether or not he brought her. Perhaps she would find someone to show her the wicked pleasures, if he would not, and see what he made of that!

END

Elijah

Josie was up to something. She was on her best behavior all day. Not once did she complain about not being able to handle the reins during their carriage ride and did not chafe at having to be seated next to him, prim and proper, while they rode at a sedate

pace. She was perfectly amiable every moment he was able to spend time with her.

All of which had his own nerves winding tighter as though she was spinning them on a spindle and waiting for him to snap. An outsider would see nothing but a lady behaving exactly as she should. Neither of his brothers nor his father seemed unnerved by her behavior, which made it even worse. He did not think he was overreacting, yet he was the only one having this reaction.

It was almost time to leave for Lady Greywood's, and Josie had disappeared into her bedroom. Should he join her? No. It would only make him feel guiltier tonight if he touched another woman, but he would do what he had to do for king and country.

His attendance this evening, so soon after his wedding, would assure the traitor there was nothing between him and Josie other than the events that necessitated their marriage. On the other hand, refraining from involving himself in the activities might spark the traitor's suspicions. Maybe he should stay home.

No.

He was not going to change his entire life because of his marriage. Nor could he ignore his responsibilities and his mission just because he wanted to remain faithful to his wife. After this mission was over, he could dedicate himself to his marriage but not before.

Decision made, Elijah straightened his cravat in the mirror before making his way over to press his ear against the wood door between his room and Josie's. He could hear very little, though she had retired to her room after supper. Was she already asleep? Reading? Though it was not her favorite pastime, it was possible.

His lips tightened. He wanted to go in to see her and question her, but what could he say?

Why were you so well-behaved today?

Are you not upset we are spending so little time together after our wedding?

Hmm. Perhaps he did not truly want the answer to the second

question. Part of him liked to think the reason for her good behavior had been to draw his attention or impress him. The idea she was content to see very little of him, maybe because of her lingering feelings for his brother, made his chest tighter, almost aching.

He could not expect her feelings toward him to have changed so soon, despite the fact, his had been engaged.

Seduce her, a little voice whispered in his mind. Bring her to the Society. See if Adam is correct about her inclinations. Dominate her, claim her, and make her your own.

No. No, he could not.

The danger would be far too great if he let her into that part of his world without knowing for sure if the traitor still had eyes within the Society. Maybe after his mission was complete. If Josie was interested. Between now and then, when he was able, he could introduce her to some of his darker desires... slowly, hopefully without frightening her.

Heading straight into one of the Society's events would be far too much for her.

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### *Josie*

Dressed in her lowest cut gown of teal and purple silk, Josie did not think she would have the nerve to attend a ball without a fichu to cover her décolletage, but for the Society of Sin, it was perfect. Even if she did feel half-naked.

Josie scowled as she snuck out of the house to the carriage, where Mary and Rex waited for her—she had sent Mary a note that afternoon when it became clear Elijah was not going to mention the event. She scowled ferociously. Elijah had already left the house, almost a quarter of an hour ago. Whether he was going to Lady Greywood's, she had no idea. He had been dressed normally, though too casually for a ball.

Joseph had gone out for the night as well, separately from Elijah.

She still cared far more about what Elijah was doing than what Joseph was doing. Maybe that should not surprise her. Eventually, she supposed she would get used to being more jealously possessive over Elijah than Joseph, but it still took her off guard.

“Hello!” Mary said cheerfully as Josie stepped into the carriage, clutching her light cloak around her. Even though it was Rex and Mary, she felt shy about how exposed she was. Bending at the waist, she wanted to press her breasts back down to keep them from falling out of her neckline. Mary was dressed similarly but without the cloak covering her cleavage. Her curves were practically spilling out the top, and Rex kept eying them as if he was waiting for that very moment.

Had Elijah ever looked at her like that? Would he ever? A wistful desire fluttered through her, leaving her slightly bereft. *Her* husband had abandoned her this evening, again and could even now be looking at some other woman like that... if he was at Lady Greywood’s. She almost hoped he was not, except then she would not know where he was and would have to make it through the evening without him. She wanted him there.

“Hello,” Josie echoed, clutching her cloak firmly around her. She was a bit shocked to see how easily Mary wore her incredibly revealing gown. Even in the dim light trickling in through the carriage’s window, she could see how thin the green silk was. While Josie could have worn her dress to a ball if covered with a fichu, Mary’s dress was certainly not suitable to be seen in most public spaces.

Mary smiled at her, reaching out to pat her knee reassuringly. At another time, it might have made her bristle, but right now, she appreciated the gesture.

“It will be all right, Josie. Rex and I will not leave your side if Elijah is not there.”

“Perhaps even if he is,” Rex murmured, a wicked smile lighting

his face and making Josie laugh, loosening her nerves. If Elijah was there, he would not be happy to find her there and would be even less happy to have Rex following them around. Mary giggled as well, shooting a saucy look at her husband.

“Troublemaker,” she teased, elbowing him gently.

“Always, petal.” Taking her hand, he lifted it to his lips to kiss.

Josie sighed, catching their attention and ruining the moment. Blushing, she lifted one shoulder, trying to shrug off her embarrassment and envy.

“You two are...” Her voice trailed off, and she sighed again, unable to find the words.

“We are very lucky,” Mary replied sympathetically.

Rex snorted. “No, I was very smart in choosing my bride. Luck had nothing to do with it.”

“You almost married Arabella,” Mary reminded him with an arch look, making Josie snort. Arabella was now Mary’s cousin by marriage, so their situation was a little closer to hers and Elijah’s than she had realized. Not that Rex had been in love with Arabella, she did not think, but he had still chosen her as his future bride.

Then he had fallen head over heels in love with Mary.

And they were happy together.

They were everything she had hoped she and Joseph would be.

Everything she did not dare to hope she and Elijah could be.

She did not think she could bear for a second for another Stuart brother to break her heart. Though she also could not deny there was something growing between her and Elijah, no matter how she might want to pretend otherwise.

## Chapter 16

Elijah

Standing at the edge of Lady Greywood's parlor, Elijah had never been more relieved that so far, tonight's activities were devoted to a demonstration of Nathan's latest invention. The Countess of Carlisle was on her back on a large ottoman, her wrists tied above her head, legs spread wide and also bound with rope. Between her legs was a large machine with a hand crank, being operated by Nathan, which sent a leather dildo pistoning between her thighs.

The Earl of Carlisle and another young man were kneeling on either side of her, sucking her nipples while she writhed and moaned. The brown leather dildo was glistening with her juices, and her pussy lips were a swollen dark pink from stimulation. Nathan watched with interest more scientific than lustful, yet that somehow added to the eroticism of the scene.

Elijah was normally on pins and needles when reduced to a mere voyeur, itching to be actively involved, but tonight, he was happy to be relegated to a spectator. If only the entire night would be this way.

He had already avoided the advances of two ladies who were thrilled to find him present, despite his recent marriage or even because of it. Lady Maguire had not been interested in him before



his wedding, but her green eyes had lit up with interest when he entered the room this evening. Her blatant questioning about the whereabouts of his wife sickened him.

The Society did not allow for revealing its secrets to the rest of the *ton*, but she was the type of woman to make sly comments to a man's wife. As long as she made it sound as though they were only lovers and did not mention the Society, there was no cause for her removal, but her emotional sadism did not appeal to him. She was hardly alone in flaunting her affairs to her lover's spouses, but Elijah would never put his wife in that position.

If he had to find a lover to use as cover within the Society, it would be someone discreet.

For the first time, he wished his father were not so against women joining their ranks. If he could have a woman by his side to help him pretend, one who understood...

That was his selfishness talking. Besides, what lady would want to pretend to be lovers for a mission, much less withstand the kind of dangerous situations the Crown's operatives often found themselves in? Evie had on occasion, but her set of skills was highly unusual, and even then, Father had done his best to keep her out of any real danger. She was one of a kind.

Just look what had happened when she had drawn her friends into her endeavors. Mary had been kidnapped and could have been killed.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, Elijah caught a glimpse of a petite redhead entering the room with her large, blond husband by her side. He nodded to Rex, who nodded back his own greeting with a peculiar expression. It took a moment for Elijah to realize they had not entered alone, and when he saw who had come into the room with them, his breath seized in his lungs.

Blue eyes wide, her fascinated gaze was fixed on the Countess of Carlisle and the men surrounding her. Blonde curls were tucked up and piled high on the back of her head, leaving her slender neck exposed. The expanse of skin showing down to her breasts,

where the neckline threatened to reveal the pink of her nipples at any moment, would have caused a stir in any venue but this. Here, she was modestly attired, yet Elijah's vision went red with a possessive fury he had never experienced.

Josie's lips parted, and she took a step closer to the scene. Unable to look away, she did not see Elijah or his reaction.

Switching his gaze back to Rex, Elijah glared with the full force of his rage. Rex smirked, completely unimpressed. Clenching his fist to assuage the itching palm that so badly wanted to be applied to Josie's backside, Elijah could not stop his cock from thickening and rising as Josie took another step toward the erotic tableau. Utterly fascinated. Aroused. He could see it. And his body responded.

\*\*\*

*Josie*

Oh. My. Goodness.

It felt as though her corset had been cinched far too tight, taking away her ability to breathe. She could not look away from the shocking demonstration of lust and passion. The room was full of people, but the only one she could see was the woman, lying naked on her back, being fondled and suckled by two men while simultaneously being... Josie did not even know what the proper word was. All of this was so improper!

Mary had not exaggerated the Society's depravities.

Taking another step forward, Josie was entranced by the flush of pink over the woman's skin, the way she writhed, the glossy shaft plunging into her body over and over again. What would it be like to be in her place? Humiliating? Thrilling? Both?

Her body was incredibly heated, her own nipples becoming sensitive and hard beneath the silky fabric of her dress, her own core growing slick and swollen. The hot excitement curled between her thighs, working its way through her body, distracting her

completely. When the woman screamed in ecstatic completion, Josie felt she might faint in sympathy.

A hard hand closed around her upper arm, making her jump, even as it pulled her toward its owner. She was dazed and confused as if she had just been woken from a deep slumber. So, when she stumbled as she turned and Elijah caught her, she could only gape up at him.

Her grand plan of shoving her presence in Elijah's face—to show him he could not leave her sitting at home while he trifled with other women and expect her to stay there—was barely remembered. The shocking display of blatant eroticism had completely undone her, and when she looked up at his hard expression, she swayed closer to him. Wanting to touch him. To be touched by him.

"Elijah..." Her voice was softer than usual, trailing off. Yes, Mary had described the Society's activities, but nothing had prepared her for the reality of seeing it or how it would make her feel. She had told herself she was curious but not interested in experiencing such things for herself.

Marriage to Elijah had already started her down the path of thinking otherwise, and she could not deny that she was hopeful for even more now. Her bottom tingled, reminding her of the times Mary had talked about Rex spanking her for misbehavior. It had been in the back of Josie's mind all this time, unacknowledged.

She wanted Elijah to spank her for being a naughty girl. The steely-eyed glare and firm grip that held her trapped only excited her more.

"Josie." He sounded almost grim, but his voice was low, not meant to be overheard by those around him—if they were even paying attention to her and Elijah. "What are you doing here?"

Rallying, she summoned her most impertinent smile—the one she had often used in the past when she knew Elijah did not approve of her behavior, but there was nothing he could do about it. Like the first time he had caught her riding in breeches, and she

had informed him she had her father's permission. At the time, he had said he would turn her over his knee if she was his.

Well, now she was.

And she wanted to know what it would be like to go over his knee.

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## *Elijah*

Pupils dilated and eyes glassy, lips slightly parted, breasts heaving with her breath, cheeks flushed pink, it was clear Josie was aroused. Jealousy shot through him, combining with the possessiveness already assaulting him. He had never seen her look like this before. The way she smiled up at him, full of sass and mischief, was pure Josie, though.

"I was invited." Her tone was silky. Smug. The little minx thought she had outmaneuvered him.

Any thoughts of watching the other members of the Society, to keep an eye out for any suspicious activity, was rapidly falling away in favor of focusing on the woman in front of him. His wife.

Directing her away from the rest of the crowd—many of who were already walking away now that the demonstration of Nathan's newest machine had reached its conclusion—Elijah reined in both his temper and his lust. Before her arrival, he had not struggled with his passion, watching the scene with the same scientific interest as Nathan.

Now that Josie was here, his interest had sharpened. Focused. Centered on her. How badly he wanted her. He was no callow youth, lacking self-control, yet having Josie here, in this arena, had him struggling with his desire in a way he had not since his days at Oxford.

"You cannot stay here." He managed to get the words out through gritted teeth.

"Why not?"

Because she was a delicious, impossible distraction. Already, he could not concentrate on anything but her and worse, he did not want to. He wanted to take her to another room and do filthy, terrible things to her. Introduce her to all the perversions and delights, the agony and ecstasy, the Society had to offer.

However, she was a lady—his wife—and had been deflowered only two nights ago. He could not do that to her.

“You do not belong here.” It was hard to focus, to find the right words, and as soon as he uttered the sentence, he knew those had been the wrong ones. Not once in his life had he seen Josie back down from a challenge.

While she might be hot and aroused, distracted in her own way, she reacted as expected—attempting to tug his arm from his grasp, her brow furrowing into a scowl.

“I was invited by Rex. I do not need *your* permission to be here.” The haughty manner she said it made it clear she would kick up a fuss if he even tried to remove her from the premises.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he looked up to meet Rex’s gaze. No longer smirking, Rex raised an eyebrow at Elijah. Josie would not be turned away tonight. Not only would she cause a scene, but Rex would intervene. That was what that look meant.

Frustrated and stymied, Elijah growled under his breath. Bloody hell. He needed to convince Josie to leave on her own.

“You were a virgin two days ago,” he said harshly. “You are not prepared for what the Society does here. What you just witnessed was only the smallest part of the activities.”

Despite the flash of insecurity that went through her eyes, his words deterred her not at all.

“You have no idea what I can handle.”

Stubborn wench. Fine then.

“Then let us find out.” Turning on his heel, he pulled her with him toward the hall. There was a multitude of rooms with various toys and implements. He would find one suited to his tastes and

show Josie exactly what she had walked into.

## Chapter 17

Josie

Heart pounding so hard in her chest, it was a wonder no one else could hear it, Josie let Elijah direct her down the hallway. They were far from alone. Quite a few of the others seemed intent on finding a place for their own pleasures now that the demonstration of that terrifyingly erotic machine had concluded. She was a bit dazed but arguing with Elijah had shaken some of the haze from her mind.

She did have to question her sanity for challenging him the way she had, although she wanted to know the truth to his desires. She wanted to be the one to share them with him. As his wife, was that not her duty? She did not like the idea of him seeking out someone else to indulge with, which she was sure was what would have happened tonight if she had not appeared. Josie had not missed the looks several of the women cast them.

Pulling her into an empty room—after passing several others otherwise occupied—Elijah dragged her to the daybed at the back of the room. Josie's eyes widened as she realized the room was decorated with extremely risqué art. She was no stranger to paintings featuring the naked form, but these went far beyond that, showing men with erect members, women with spread legs, and an entire orgy of sexual acts.

More disconcerting were the various depictions of women and men bent over and showing off reddened buttocks or cheeks with red stripes crossing them, while another man or woman stood over them with a birch or whip. Josie's buttocks clenched as if to ward off such punishment.

As if sensing her disquiet, Elijah halted beside the daybed, looking down at her with brows raised.

"We can stop now, Josie. Just say the word, and I will take you home straightaway." *Where you belong.* The unsaid sentiment hung in the air between them, rousing Josie's spirit.

"Perhaps it is you who cannot handle me," she jibed. "Should I find someone else who would be willing to demonstrate the Society's activities?"

Elijah's eyes flashed, hotter and madder than she had ever seen. She tried to take a step back, but his hand, still on her arm, prevented her movement.

"You will *not*." His voice came out in an offended growl.

Josie squeaked as he sat and yanked her over his knee in one swift movement. Breathless, she stared at the pretty blue damask pattern on the daybed, with Elijah's thighs beneath her stomach. He tilted her forward, flipping her skirts up and leaving her lower body exposed. The slitted drawers she was wearing parted easily, and his hand came crashing down on her bottom.

Josie shrieked, the red-hot pain reverberating through her. Mary said she *liked* this?

"Ready to stop now?" Elijah sounded smug.

Gritting her teeth, Josie bit back the curses she wanted to yell. The pain from the initial impact was already fading, leaving behind a throbbing warmth that really was so bad. Besides, she could do anything Mary could. She certainly would not admit to Elijah she could not handle him. Josie was certain this was the one and only chance she would have to prove herself to him.

"Hardly." She tossed her head, looking over her shoulder at him, and it was her turn to feel smug when she realized his eyes



were fixed on the upturned curve of her buttocks. This position left her exposed, but she did not mind being exposed to Elijah. She welcomed it. "Is that the worst you can do?"

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Elijah

Why did he keep challenging and provoking her? He knew what her response would be, yet he could not stop.

Because you do not want to stop, the insidious little voice in his head whispered. *You do not want her to tell you to stop.*

No, he did not.

Now, she was over his lap, one creamy cheek had a pink splotch in the center, and his cock was aching hard, pressing into her side. Her sassy expression when she turned to challenge him had only made him harder. His cock throbbed in excited anticipation, all of his senses focusing on her.

If asked, Elijah would have said he wanted an obedient woman, a submissive woman who would obey his commands, but there was something about Josie's defiance that aroused him far more than compliance ever had. All their lives, Josie had challenged and riled him, and now, he was finally conquering her.

"Very well, sweetheart," he drawled. "If you insist."

Smack! Smack!

Rather than start lightly, as he might have with someone new to the Society, Elijah went right in with hard swats to her upturned rear. This time, Josie was prepared for them. He felt, more than heard, her gasp, but she did not cry out the way she had before.

Clenching his teeth, Elijah brought his hand down harder, venting more of his feelings on her tender skin, spanking her hard enough, the palm of his hand stung. He heard another small gasp, but that was it. The little minx was trying to prove herself by taking the pain... but was she also enjoying it?

Elijah had to know. With Josie's competitive spirit, he would

not put it past her to endure a punishment just to show she could. She certainly deserved one, coming here tonight without telling him, refusing to leave, then threatening to find another partner. Well, if she was not enjoying it, he would end it sooner.

However, when his fingers dipped down to her pussy, he found her hot and dripping wet. She moaned, lifting her hips slightly. Despite the dark pink splotches decorating her bottom—maybe because of them—she was aroused. Fate had given him a little masochist for a wife, but how much of one was she?

The dark desires he had constantly shoved to the back of his mind pushed forward, harder to ignore now that he had evidence of her enjoyment. Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Elijah gave her another few hefty whacks on her bottom, leaving her panting, though she still had not cried out again. Little minx.

“No man will touch you except me.” That was the hardest swat of all, yet she still did not cry out, though he felt her shift against his legs, stifling her sound.

“If you let another woman touch you, you will find what is good for the gander is good for the goose!” Josie snapped back. He could not see her face, but there was a satisfying quaver to her voice, as though she was holding back tears. So, her spanking was having some effect.

Elijah ground his teeth together, then lowered his voice, glancing back to the door, which had not been fully closed behind them. Doors at the Society’s events often were left open.

Bowing his head down, he whispered, “I am still investigating connections between the Society and the traitor. I may not have a choice.”

“Then neither will I.” She turned her head to look at him again, her voice low. Blue eyes swimming with tears, cheeks flushed, she was still stunningly beautiful, maybe even more so. She met his gaze defiantly, challenging him with a mere look. “Or you could take me about with you. No one will suspect you are spying when you have your wife with you.”

Elijah blinked. He could not think of a convincing argument against her point. Yes, he wanted to keep her out of danger and did not want the traitor to think that he was too invested in his new wife, but if the traitor was part of the Society or still had connections here, he would know Elijah was not the one who had brought Josie. Since the traitor seemed to know Elijah's family well enough to have set Josie and Joseph up as a distraction, he would realize Elijah would not allow his wife to freely wander about the Society.

In a way, Josie's impetuous actions had provided them with the perfect cover for having her here with him. Which meant he also had the perfect excuse to avoid the ladies within the Society.

However, they would have to lay down some ground rules.

Josie

Ha, he had not thought of that, had he? Despite the burning, throbbing ache in her bottom, Josie was elated. Her point had been made. Elijah was going to give in. She could tell.

"Very well." His voice was clipped but not unhappy, and Josie barely kept from crowing in triumph. Unfortunately, he was not finished. "You will come with me to the Society's events, but you will not wander away from me at any time."

Smack!

The spanking started again, just as hard and painful, his hand punctuating each of his orders. The short reprieve should have given her chastised buttocks a rest, but each swat was even more painful now that it was starting anew.

"You will not do any investigating on your own."

Smack!

"You will not get into any trouble."

Smack!

"And you absolutely will not go off with any other man while

you are here.”

Smack! Smack! Smack!

If his vehemence had not emphasized how important he felt that last order was, the flurry of swats that followed it did. They rained down on already reddened skin, stinging and burning with each additional slap of his hand. Josie squirmed on his lap, biting her lip against crying out before realizing she might be working against herself by staying silent.

While it felt like giving in to cry out, there was also something freeing about it. As soon as she made a noise, the rest of her body followed, squirming and kicking on his lap, as if loosening that bit of self-control had loosened all of it, and tears poured down her cheeks. Elijah’s hand pressed against the small of her back, pinning her in place as he continued to spank her.

“Ow! Elijah, please! I agree!” The only other time she had felt this out of control was during the events that led to her wedding, but unlike with that villain, she did not mind the feeling because she knew with Elijah, she was perfectly safe. It made all the difference. Elijah might spank her, might make her cry from the stinging swats, but he would never truly harm her.

“Oh, you think it is going to be that easy, do you, minx?” There was a bit of humor in his voice as Elijah stopped the assault on her tender nates. Josie sighed with relief, gulping back a sob. Her bottom was red-hot and throbbing, and she did not like the idea of sitting down again.

Fingers touched her wetness again, dipping between the sensitive lips and making her whimper. How did her body perform such complex and illogical alchemy, taking the pain and somehow turning it into pleasure? The sting had not lessened, yet the moment Elijah touched between her legs, hot need flared to life, and the sting did not feel the same.

Then his fingers moved away, exploring higher, and Josie squeaked as she felt the slick digits pressing *elsewhere*.

“Elijah, stop! No, please!” Her face flamed red, feeling even

hotter than her bottom as her most private area was penetrated.

Ignoring her protests, his finger pushed rudely inside her, stretching the tiny opening. It felt wicked and utterly perverse. The sting was nothing compared to the burning of her cheeks, yet she felt it acutely.

“You wanted to know what the Society does,” Elijah reminded her, his finger pushing deeper, stretching her, forcing her tiny hole to open for him. Had Mary or the others spoken of this... this perversion? Josie could not focus on her memories to remember. All she could focus on was the awful, shocking, and thrillingly intimate sensation of his finger moving in her backside. It slid out, then pushed in again, mimicking the marital act but in the wrong location. Josie felt as though she might faint. “I will possess every inch of your body, Josie. Your mouth. Your cunt. And your arse.”

Now she really was going to faint.

Chapter 18

Elijah

The tight grip of Josie's arse around his finger was cutting off his circulation. He could only imagine how it would feel around his cock. Her reaction to this new stimulation, somewhere between horrified and aroused, amused him. It was not often he managed to throw Josie off her stride.

He had expected the spanking to have more of an impact, but there was something to be said about the mental dynamics a woman went through before taking a man in her arse. As often as he saw men together in the Society, it was easy to forget the extremely taboo nature of the act, and apparently, Mary had not informed Josie as fully as either of them had thought.

Knowing that made him grin wickedly. He would enjoy educating Josie thoroughly in the decadent debaucheries he favored.

Pushing his finger into Josie's bottom, between the two reddened cheeks, inflamed his lust in a way no other woman ever had. Knowing no man had ever touched her there added a hint of taboo to his enjoyment, though it also meant he had to temper his lust in a way he had not in years. The same way he had on their wedding night.

If she insisted on joining him at the Society, sooner or later, she

would take his cock in her arse, which meant he needed to prepare her.

“Elijah!” The half-scandalized, half-aroused way she said his name as he thrust his finger back and forth between her hot cheeks, stretching out the tiny hole between them, made his cock throb.

“Yes, Josie?” he asked silkily, pushing his finger all the way into her and twisting it back and forth, making her muscles clamp down around him. As he twisted, he spread out his other fingers, brushing against her wet, swollen pussy lips. “Do not try to tell me you are not enjoying yourself.”

Whimpering, Josie squirmed on his lap.

“I cannot... you cannot...” She did not seem to be able to find the words she wanted to use.

Chuckling, Elijah decided to give her a reprieve. Pulling his finger from her bottom, he gave her hips a gentle shove, helping her to the floor so she was on her knees. Their gazes met, then her eyes darted away. Her cheeks weren’t quite as pink as her bottom, but she was blushing so hard, it was close.

Her hair was mussed, falling in tendrils around her pink tear-streaked cheeks, and her breasts heaved in her dress, looking as though they were going to spill over the neckline at any moment. Elijah decided to help them out.

He slid his fingers between her skin and the dress, caressing her breast and lifting it out of her dress. Josie gasped, looking down to where he was fondling her, her blue eyes wide. Her hands remained at her side, hanging as if she did not know what to do with them, so she did nothing at all.

With his other hand, Elijah unfastened the front of his pants, catching Josie’s attention. Her lips parted as his cock came into view as though she was already ready to receive him there. Perhaps Mary had been more forthcoming about that particular act. The thought amused him, and he looked forward to seeing Josie’s reaction when confronted with the reality.

Josie

It felt as all her blood had rushed to her bottom, then up to her head, and now back between her legs. She was dizzy from the movements and the overwhelming mix of sensations. Pressing her thighs together, she could not deny her body's reaction. No matter how much she might not want to admit it, she had become even more aroused as Elijah had moved his finger back and forth in her bottom.

Other than the emotional impact, it had even felt rather good. She could not shake off the feeling it had been utterly *wrong*, though. That she was even worse for having enjoyed it, in any small part. *Sinful* was exactly the right word for how he had made her feel.

Now, she was on her knees, but instead of prayer or penance, Elijah was fondling her breast, rubbing his fingers over her nipple, and creating a sweet ache inside her. Josie whimpered as he freed his cock, the long, thick length springing out mere inches from her face.

From the little Mary had told her, she knew what Elijah's expectation was, and sudden nerves gripped her. She should not have worried because she was not given much of a choice.

Fingers from one hand wrapped around the back of her neck while the other pinched her nipple, both of them pulling her forward. The tiny bud throbbed in Elijah's firm grip, the tugging sending a direct line of heat from her breast down between her legs to join her growing ardor. She squirmed, rubbing her thighs together, even as she obligingly opened her lips to receive him.

Not truly knowing what to expect, she was surprised at the softness of his skin as he slid onto her tongue. Automatically, she closed her lips around him, and he hissed, tightening his hold on her neck.

"Less teeth, minx." It was not a particularly harsh command,

but Josie obeyed without thinking. She had not even realized her teeth had started to come down, an instinctive reaction to having something too large pushing its way into her mouth.

Sliding from her neck into her hair, Elijah's fingers caressed, then tugged, pulling her head back, so she was looking up at him as his manhood pushed deeper between her lips. Heat bloomed on her cheeks, but she could not look away as he pulled her farther forward. The tip of him hit the back of her throat, making her gag.

"Breathe, Josie. Breathe and swallow." His crooning helped relax her, and she found herself allowing him to move her head back and forth, almost hypnotized by the motion. His finger toyed with her nipple, sending more waves of liquid heat to her core. The throbbing from her spanked cheeks no longer felt as painful, adding to the arousal curling through her.

She whimpered as he pushed deeper, unable to look away from his dark gaze. Watching him watch her suckle him was far more exciting than she would have countenanced. The intensity of his expression, the way his eyes flared and his breathing deepened when her lips slid down the length of him, tongue playing along the underside, exploring him, added to her erotic entrancement.

The taste and texture of him were strange but not unpleasant. Little bits of sweetly sour liquid leaked onto her tongue, and she sucked harder, enjoying his groan and the way his fingers tangled in her hair, the way he tightened his grip on her breast. While she was the one on her knees, seeing how she could make him react made her feel far more powerful than she would have thought.

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Elijah

She was making him weak.

While she might not have much experience, Josie was enthusiastic and learning quickly how to pleasure him. The connection between them was also different from any other

woman he had been with. Maybe because for so long, he had dreamed of being able to quiet Josie's smart mouth, and finally, he was in the most pleasurable way possible.

She seemed to be deriving her own enjoyment, which fed into his. He groaned as she sucked harder, his fingers closing around her nipple in a painful reward for her efforts. The humming vibrations of her whimpers as he played with her were driving him wild.

He would not be able to last much longer at this rate, but her throat was not where he wanted to spend his climax. Not this time.

Pulling her head off of him, leaving his cock shiny and slick from her efforts, he lifted and moved her like a doll, repositioning them with her forearms braced against the daybed while he stood behind her. Josie went willingly, not hesitating until he pressed his cock against her swollen pussy from behind. She.

"Elijah?" There was a note of uncertainty in her voice when she glanced over her shoulder.

Elijah chuckled. Had Mary not discussed positions with her, either? Well, this would be interesting.

"Brace yourself, minx." He gripped her hips and thrust in. Josie cried out, her head dropping as the silken walls of her body gripped his shaft, squeezing and clenching around it in hot, liquid splendor. "I want to look at your arse while I fuck you." Squeezing one of her reddened buttocks, reigniting the pain from her spanking, he grinned at her little squeal as she tightened around him.

"Such a pretty red arse." He squeezed again, pulling back to thrust back in. The red cheeks rippled when his body impacted against them, the little star of her anus winking between. Moving his hand back to her hip, Elijah rode her hard. "A spanking looks good on your, minx. You may come if you can." Elijah was curious to see if she could. She was so hot and wet around him, her arousal coating the length of his cock as he plunged inside of her.

"Oh! Oh, Elijah!" she gasped as he thrust hard, taking up a fast

but steady rhythm, pounding into her from behind, every stroke driving him closer to his climax. Leaning forward, he moved his hands from her hips to her breasts, pulling them free from her dress and filling his hands with her soft flesh. Josie let out a small sob as his fingers closed around the mounds, seeking out the hard buds of her nipples and pinching them harshly.

“You wanted to be part of the Society, minx? Then you will be mine when you are here. Mine to fuck, mine to pleasure, mine to punish as I deem fit.” His voice was harsh. His rhythm faltered as his needs and desires grew along with his declarations. Josie’s elbows buckled under the onslaught, leaving her ass high in the air with her bent down before him, as if in sexual supplication to his demands.

Josie

While she had always described Elijah as bossy, this was different. He was commanding. Masterful. Driving her wild in a completely disparate manner from when he was bossy.

Feeling his hands moving over her body, his thrusts pounding into her from behind, she did not think she had ever felt so humbled and vulnerable. She had definitely never liked it. His filthy words mixing with the pain as his body slapped against sensitized skin and the pleasure as he stimulated her with his cock and hands was an erotic mix that sent her reeling.

Unable to hold herself up, she half-collapsed against the daybed, sobbing from the intense sensations assailing her. Sweet agony, rough ecstasy, blending so seamlessly until she could no longer tell one from the other. Heat built upon heat, rolling through her body in waves.

“Elijah!” Not able to contain the sensations cascading through her, she cried out against the sheets of the day bed, quivering and completely collapsing against it. Elijah’s hands and cock held up

her lower body as he drove into her from behind, turning her utterly insensible with sensual rapture as her climax overtook her.

With a low growl and the tight grip of his hands, he pushed deep inside her, joining her in glorious completion. Hot pulses of liquid filled her throbbing channel as her heated cheeks pressed against his body, her nipples still aching from his pinching abuse.

It was the most glorious moment of her life.

Chapter 19

Elijah

Sitting at the breakfast table, Elijah's head jerked up every time he heard movement outside the door. After carrying a satiated but completely insensible Josie home, it had been sheer torture to leave her alone in her bed. Every instinct told him she belonged in his, naked body curled up against him, so he could watch over her through the night.

While her appearance at the Society's event last night should not put her in danger, gossip they were sharing a bed—both rare and unfashionable among their social set, except in love matches—might put her in danger. Elijah could not allow the traitor to know that his feelings for her were anything other than neighborly and perhaps possessive as a husband would be with a wife. If only he could ensure there was no gossip... but as a spy, he knew exactly how much servants saw and heard. Even within their own household, the spymaster of England's, there was no stemming such a tide.

Their servants were all trusted and sworn to secrecy, but someone out there knew his father was more than a marquess—someone intent on doing damage with that knowledge. Elijah did not intend to allow his wife to be used against him or harmed because of him. Josie had already been frightened when the villain

lured her into the gardens, and he still had not found that culprit, which grated on him.

“Good morning.” Adam sauntered into the room with his usual air of arrogance, grinning widely as he took in Elijah’s reaction. “Bit jumpy, are we?”

Elijah scowled at his brother, though there was no real heat behind his glare. He cast his eyes over Adam’s rumpled form. Stubble darkened his jawline, his cravat was missing, and he appeared to have rolled around until his clothes were hopelessly wrinkled.

“You look as if you have been up all night.”

“I have.” Adam sat down and gestured to the footman for some coffee. “I was in the Warrens. While I did not see the elusive Frenchman, the barman at the Tramp’s Den said there had been a Frenchman about recently.”

“Really?” The Tramp’s Den was one of the most popular gaming hells in the Warren, run by a man known to most as the Tramp. Wealthy, ruthless, and recently married to a fallen debutante from the *ton*, the man was not to be crossed, but he had his own code of honor. Elijah scrubbed his hand over his chin. He would have to go down there at some point to speak to the man.

“I do not know if it was our man, but...” Adam shrugged. He looked decidedly weary, though his first sip of coffee brought some light back to his eyes. “Where is the lady of the house this morning?”

“Still abed.” Elijah’s head jerked up as he heard a noise out in the hall, his pulse quickening in anticipation. He ignored his brother’s snort of laughter. What Adam thought did not matter. Should he not be anticipating seeing his own wife?

When she walked through the door, looking beautiful and relaxed with her hair pulled into a low knot on the back of her head and wearing a loose, blue day gown that matched her eyes, Elijah felt something inside him relax. He and Adam got to their feet as she entered. Being able to see for himself, she suffered no ill

effects from the previous evening undid the knot of tension he had not even realized had formed in his chest.

Josie met his gaze, and her face turned pink with a hot blush, causing him to grin as she came to a halt as she reached the table, eyeing the chair with trepidation. The smile on his face widened.

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Josie

Blast the man. Her husband was clearly enjoying her discomfiture, and from the amusement in Adam's eyes, he had an idea of Josie's dilemma.

Though the color had completely faded from her bottom this morning, leaving nothing but creamy skin behind, it was still tender, which as she'd discovered when she sat to do her toilette. Pressing her lips together, Josie summoned her fortitude as she sat, only a little more gingerly than she may normally have.

Sitting down stung, but only for a moment, then she was able to settle down, mostly comfortably in her seat, pretending nothing was out of sorts. At least, she would be happy to, if not for the wicked gleam in Elijah's eyes, which meant the blush on her cheeks was not going anywhere any time soon.

"Good morning." She was determined to pretend her bottom was not throbbing beneath her. How did one handle this part? Another question for Mary the next time she saw her. Though Josie felt it would be far easier if she woke up with Elijah next to her instead of having to face him across the table when breaking her fast.

"Good morning," the two brothers both chorused. Elijah smiled at her, then looked down at his plate.

She tried not to let it get under her skin that last night had not substantially changed anything between them. It had felt revolutionary to her, but... well, Elijah was much more experienced. Her stomach twisted, but she could not deny the

truth. Probably, it had not meant the same thing to him it had to her.

Well, she was used to that with the Stuart brothers.

As if the thought had summoned him, the door behind her opened again, and Josie twisted slightly in her seat to see Joseph walking through. She was about to turn back when she caught a glimpse of his expression.

He was grinning ear to ear, literally beaming. There was a lightness to his step she had never seen before, and he bounced as he walked. When she looked back at Elijah and Adam, to see their reactions to Joseph's unusual exultation, they appeared as flummoxed as she was.

"Good morning!" Joseph sang out, his voice ringing with happiness. "Congratulate me! Miss Bliss and I are to be married!"

Josie had already started to turn back to look at him again when he made his announcement. She froze in her motion, the expression on her face freezing as well, and it was suddenly very hard to breathe.

She had known it was coming. They all had known it must be coming. That was why Elijah had stepped in to marry her rather than Joseph. Yet hearing it made her feel... made her feel...

Bloody hell, she did not know how she felt. This was hardly shocking news, yet it still felt as if someone had elbowed her in the gut. Then guilt swamped her because she was married to someone else—who happened to be sitting across the table from her—and she should be completely loyal to him. The last feeling was a surge of relief and happiness for Joseph.

The happiness she understood—she wanted him to be happy—but why the relief?

"Congratulations!" Adam bellowed, jumping up to hug his brother. Elijah was only a step or two behind him, just as enthusiastic if not as loud.

Josie pushed her lips into a smile. She really was truly happy for Joseph. If Miss Bliss was the kind of wife he wanted, he would

have never been happy with her, anyway. Though she had told herself that before, this time, it really struck home. She was finally coming to realize Joseph was not the kind of husband she wanted.

He was not part of the Society. He did not have Elijah's presence or his commanding demeanor. In fact, she would have been able to push Joseph around in whatever direction she wished, as she always had. After several days of being married to Elijah, that did not seem as appealing as it once had.

Getting to her feet, she could not help but laugh when Joseph hugged her enthusiastically in his joy, any awkwardness between them forgotten when he was so overcome with emotion.

"Congratulations," she said, meaning it completely. Maybe her heart was easily changeable, or perhaps she should accept that her feelings for him had not been as deep as she had thought. That was why she was relieved. It did not hurt as she had thought. She had truly let go of him, which meant she could focus on the Stuart brother she had married.

Elijah

Hurt and jealousy ripped through Elijah's chest as he watched Joseph wrap Josie in his arms, and she went oh-so-willingly. Logically, he knew his reaction was unwarranted. Joseph was happily celebrating that he would soon be married to the woman he loved... but the truth was, how Joseph felt did not matter to Elijah. How Josie felt did.

He had seen her face when Joseph made his announcement, the way she had frozen, hiding her emotions, but he could not tell what she was feeling now. Was she enjoying Joseph's embrace? Savoring it as something she desired but could not have?

When they stepped away from each other, he could see the smile on Josie's face, and it cracked something inside his chest, sending a brutal ache through him. Rubbing his hand over the

spot, Elijah took an instinctive step back, moving away from what was causing the pain—his wife and his brother.

Unfortunately, the movement attracted attention, and the other three turned to look at him.

Forcing his smile back onto his lips, Elijah dropped his hand to his side, focused on making sure it was relaxed and not clenched in a fist. It still felt as though his chest was too tight, making it hard to breathe, but he did not let his internal conflict show through.

“I am very happy for you,” he said, and it must have sounded genuine because none of them looked at him askance. “I wish I could stay and talk, but I have much to do today.”

“I understand,” Joseph replied, still grinning from ear to ear.

Elijah was happy for his brother, even as he was frustrated with the chaos his own life had become. This was why he had married Josie—so Joseph could have this. He had not expected it to be so hard, though.

Directing a small bow to Josie, Elijah turned on his heel and left the room. Had she appeared disappointed he was leaving or was that his imagination? His overly hopeful imagination?

That was the crux of his problem, he finally realized. He had known his feelings for Josie had changed, but he had not truly understood how much until now. The most startling revelation since their marriage—he wanted her to love him because somehow, he had already fallen in love with her.

And he did not know what to do about it.

So, he retreated to work on something he could handle—his mission to find the traitor.

Chapter 20

Josie

“Men are boors.” Josie flopped down on Mary’s couch, ignoring the glance Mary and Lily exchanged before sitting down on the chairs across from her, leaving the table with tea and cakes between them. Crossing her arms over her chest, Josie pouted. Really, it felt good to be able to say exactly what she thought and act how she felt instead of having to put on a happy face.

At home, she had to put a smile on her face, lest anyone think she was upset because of Joseph’s engagement when it was actually Elijah causing her turmoil. She did not know how to explain that to the Stuarts.

Her mother had been no help. After three days of being ignored by Elijah, everywhere except the bedroom, she had ventured to her mother’s house to ask for womanly advice. Why she had sought out her mother before her friends, she was not sure, except she was a bit embarrassed after waxing eloquent about her feelings for Joseph all these years, only to have to admit it was now Elijah causing her heartache and frustration.

Mother had told her Elijah was surely busy with his duties, and she should be happy their nights were pleasurable.

It was not that Josie was unhappy with their nights, but she was definitely not happy about their days. Elijah was avoiding her,

for goodness sake! Well, she could not be sure, but that's what it felt like. They had barely seen each other outside of meals and the bedroom. Things were very heated and pleasurable there, but last night, he had not even gone in the same carriage with her to the Finchburys' ball! He had met her there, danced with her twice, then disappeared to do who-knows-what, only to reappear at the end of the ball when it was time to leave.

There had been no opportunity to talk. The moment they got into the dark privacy of the carriage, he had pulled her onto his lap to kiss her breathless and fondle her to insensibility.

"Is that supposed to be a revelation?" Lily teased, and Josie stuck out her tongue at her friend. Lily seemed to have very little interest in the gentlemen of London, much to her mother's and godmother's dismay. Though she was beautiful, sweet, and intelligent, Lily cynically attributed the gentlemen's interest in her to her connection to her godmother, the Duchess of Richmond.

Some of them were drawn to her by that connection, but by no means all of them, if only she would see it. Today, she was dressed in a lilac-and-white striped walking dress, which clung to her curves and made her dark hair and eyes look stand out nicely against her creamy skin and the dress. Her quiet beauty was a large draw to the men—though Lily was cynical about that aspect of their interest as well, come to think of it.

"Any man in particular?" Mary's tone was far more sympathetic. Leaning forward, she poured the tea for them all with an adeptness Josie envied. Not that Josie could not pour tea, but she had a tendency to pour too fast and overfill the cups. Mary filled it to the correct line in every cup. "Yesterday, we heard the banns read in church for Joseph and Miss Bliss."

Josie winced inwardly. Yes, this was why she had gone to her mother's first, for all the good that had done her. She did not want Mary and Lily to know how flighty and inconstant she was. There was nothing to do but tell the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it made her.

“Elijah. I am happy for Joseph... no, truthfully.” Mary and Lily had exchanged another look, and she sighed aloud. “I know it sounds fickle, but I think my feelings for Joseph are gone. What hurt more was losing the dream of marrying him than actually losing him.”

“That actually makes sense.” Lily nodded thoughtfully, her dark eyes unfocused for a moment, the way they often did when she was analyzing a situation. “The two of you might have been a good match when you were younger, but...”

“I outgrew him.” Josie wrinkled her nose. “Which sounds like an awful thing to say, but it is true.”

“What is Elijah doing now? You looked happy enough at Lady Greywood’s last week.”

Lily sat up straight, affronted. Unlike Josie, whose interest in the Society had been more prurient from the very beginning, Lily regarded the activities of the Society as a science experiment, maybe a social experiment. They had been present for Mary’s pre-wedding night education from Mary’s cousin, Arabella and Arabella’s friend, the Countess of Spencer. After that, Josie noticed Lily’s distraction whenever Arabella or the Countess and their husbands were around for her to observe.

Lily was the one who had noticed that the Earl and Countess of Spencer disappeared almost every ball, only to reappear an hour or so later, with the occasional wrinkles in the countess’ skirts or the Earl’s cravat a bit askew.

“You went to a Society event, and you did not tell me?” Indignation was written in every line of her body. “What was it like? Did you participate? Do you think Mary’s observations have been accurate?”

“Hey!” Mary scowled. “There is nothing wrong with my observation skills.” For someone who had spent most of her life on the sidelines, observing rather than participating, Mary was affronted Lily might be maligning her.

“There is nothing wrong with her acuity for observation,

though she did leave out some details. Did you know men leave behind a mess for us to clean up when they are done with the marital act? And that they want to put their fingers and things in our bottoms?!"

Mary blushed bright red, clashing horribly with her strawberry blonde hair, and Lily's mouth dropped open.

"Josie!" Mary hissed her name, leaning forward, eyes darting back and forth, and Josie scoffed.

"These are things she should know, Mary! Elijah put his finger in my bottom at Lady Greywood's and said he would do more, eventually."

"I really need to start watching when I walk into a conversation." Evie's appearance at the door of Mary's drawing room caused an immediate commotion. The three of them jumped up from where they were seated and rushed to greet her. Evie's expression was hilarious, obviously having overheard Josie's statement, but that did not stop her from hugging Josie fiercely.

"I did not know you would be here!" Josie said as she stepped away from her friend.

"I did not know if I would be able to make it. I have a new position as a ladies' maid for the Countess of Perth." Evie's lips twisted in a wry smile, and Josie finally noticed Evie's appearance. She was so used to Evie's various outfits, she did not always take note of them and what they meant. No longer wearing the drab browns and greys she had donned as a regular servant or scullery maid, she was now garbed similarly to Daisy, in slightly more fashionable and more flattering attire. "I shall probably be there at least 'til the end of the Season."

"Will you be coming home then?" Josie perked up. Having Evie back in the household would make things far more tolerable, even if Elijah continued his baffling behavior. Maybe she could even help Josie make sense of it.

"Possibly. It depends on if I find anything." Evie sighed.

They made their way back to their seats, Evie joining them on

the couch. Someone looking in the doorway might be taken aback to see a ladies' maid sitting and gossiping with three fashionable young ladies of the *ton*, but Mary was not at-home to anyone but them. The butler, Cormack, would see to it they were left alone, and Rex had already met Evie.

"So far, whoever is behind these plots is acting as a puppet master, sending their minions to and fro. My uncle and Elijah are not any further along in their investigations than I am. The traitor has covered their tracks well."

"I suppose one would need to," Mary murmured with a tiny smile. Evie wrinkled her nose at her, and Josie giggled. Like Lily, Mary could be very quiet, but she had a wicked sense of humor.

Deciding to ignore Mary's comment, Evie turned her attention to Lily.

"Anything on your end? Especially from France or Russia?"

"One of my correspondents on the coast has mentioned some unusual activity near the Talbot estates—the usual smuggling, but there were rumors not only goods were being passed along. No way to verify it from here, of course." Lily frowned, clearly disliking not having the information to help.

"Talbot estates... that is on the east coast," Josie said, reaching for the information her mother had drilled into her over and over. It was not too far a reach. The Earl was new to his title after the recent death of his father and unwed, which meant Josie's mother had been interested in him. Unfortunately, in her mother's mind, he had not appeared in London this Season. "Lord Sebastian Jones, thirty-three, unwed, and not here for the Season, though he is several months out of mourning."

"How do you keep all of that in your head?" Lily asked, shaking hers. Then she frowned again, tilting her head as though trying to shake loose a thought. "Jones? Any relation to *the* Captain Nathan Jones?"

Josie sat up straight, her mouth dropping open. She had not put the two together when Lily had said the Talbot estate.

“Yes, that is him. But he works for Uncle Oliver!” Her gaze flitted between her three friends, looking for their reactions, but they all seemed as struck and worried as she was. “He is Elijah’s friend, and he was a captain in the army. He cannot be a traitor... can he?”

Lily shook her head, more in denial of the idea than an actual firm rejection. Pressing her lips together, Evie looked away unhappily.

“The traitor must either be someone close to the family or has someone close to the family feeding him information,” Mary said. She appeared even paler than normal. Captain Jones had been one of the men who had been with Elijah and Rex when she had been kidnapped, and Josie and Lily had come running to fetch Rex. Had he orchestrated the whole thing? “Otherwise, how would he have known to set up Josie with a letter from Joseph? Captain Jones would be perfectly situated.”

“We do not even know if there is any connection to what is going on and the Talbot estates,” Josie argued. Blast it. She liked the man, and she trusted her intuition, which said he was not a traitor. “It could be coincidence.”

“It could be,” Evie agreed, pressing her lips together. “But we cannot know for sure without investigating, and we all know my uncle and cousin will not think to look closely at him. They trust him, and they have a tendency to believe they are infallible.”

“Does this mean you will be going to the Talbot estates when the Season ends?” Josie asked, holding back her disappointment. Lily and Mary looked disappointed as well since they would not be able to join Evie on her adventures, either.

“Perhaps. We shall see.” Evie shook her head. “I will make no firm plans as of yet. There are still a few more weeks in the Season, and I would like to see Joseph and Miss Bliss be married.”

“Will you have a meeting with her in the retiring room, too?” Josie quipped, making them all laugh. Joking and talking with her friends had made her feel so much better, even though they had

moved off the topic of Elijah and the Society.

Remembering there was a traitor and lives in danger put everything else into perspective. Somehow, she would figure out how to deal with Elijah.

Elijah

Walking through the streets in the Warrens toward the more respectable areas of London, Elijah was deep in thought. After visiting the Tramp's Den, as well as several other gaming hells, he did not know any more than he had before. On the other hand, he was not exactly a known quantity in the Warrens. Adam was the one who had cultivated the reputation as a gambler, playing the part of the rakish, ne'er-do-well third son. As the heir, Elijah had purposefully gone in the opposite direction. The roles had served them well, but it chafed that Mitchell and Adam had been more successful in their investigations.

This was also the first night he had not gone to Josie's bed, and he could not stop wondering what she was thinking and whether he was taking the right tack. His mind should be focused on the mission and the traitor, but his thoughts kept shuttling back and forth.

He did not have equal time to catch a traitor and win his wife's heart, especially considering her heart had been taken when he married her. Something he had forgotten when he seduced her their first night and later when he punished her at Lady Greywood's. After Joseph had announced his engagement, Elijah had continued to go to her bed, but he had quickly discovered

having her body and her eager willingness for pleasure did not soothe him. If anything, it made him feel more savage.

Yes, she was willing, but what did that *mean*? Was she doing her wifely duties? Was she addicted to the pleasure he gave her? Did she have any feelings for him beyond wanting the pleasure he could give her?

Unfortunately, that last question was the one he felt the least secure about the answer.

Josie could be a dutiful daughter when she wanted to be, but she was not quiet if she did not like her duties. Overall, she had settled into the household very nicely. The servants all liked her, Mrs. Brandon was happy with her, and she was shaping up to be everything a future Marchioness would need to be.

She did love the pleasure—and the pain, though he had been gentler with her since the night at Lady Greywood's, giving her time to adjust, a few swats to her pert bottom here and there, a pinch and twist of her nipples to make her gasp and whimper. He would happily work her up to more soon, but it was not something for every night.

Beyond that? Josie was a hedonistic little thing. She loved horseback riding, dancing, long walks in the country—she was happiest when active and enjoying herself—but she could enjoy those activities with most people. There were very few people she disliked and had never indicated any partiality on her part—other than she thought Elijah was a stuffy prig, and she had never preferred to do any of those things with him.

Somehow, that had translated to a passion in the bedroom—luckily for them, given the circumstances—but Elijah did not want to fool himself. Josie might very well be happy with any bloke who could bring her to climax. She liked people. All sorts of people, and even when they had been at their most combative, she had still liked him. She had threatened to find another man at Lady Greywood's, which only seemed to confirm that worry.

He was so lost in thought, he almost missed the footsteps

coming up behind him. Glancing over his shoulder, he half-shouted and turned, twisting and falling to the ground to avoid the gleaming knife headed for his back. His attacker made no sound as they stumbled, caught off balance when the swing did not make its target.

Rather than jumping to his feet, as his instinct wanted, Elijah kicked out and caught his attacker's legs, sweeping them out from under him. The man went down, uttering a low curse. Another shadow separated from the darkness near them, also armed with a knife. Elijah bared his teeth, pressed the button just under the carved handle of his cane, pulled the blade out, and met the second attacker.

The dim lights in the Warren did not make it easy on any of them. The second man cursed—not as quietly as the first had—when Elijah met knife with swordstick. The clatter of metal in the streets would have drawn attention anywhere else, but not here. Anyone within hearing would scatter and wait until a victor emerged and left. Only then would they come to see if there was a body to loot.

Elijah did not intend for it to be his body, but it was two against one, and his first attacker was already getting to his feet. Distracted by the movement, he did not keep his guard up, and the second man's knife sliced through his coat, biting into his left arm and making him hiss from the stinging pain.

He parried the next stroke, forcing the other man back and giving him the space to turn. His back was against the wall of the building beside him, giving him cover, so they could not come at him from the back and the front together. It also gave him just enough breathing room to give his attackers a good look.

They were both the usual Warren ruffian, the kind that could be hired for coin to do just about anything. Both of them sneered at him, one fair and one dark-haired, big men with broad shoulders and big guts. Even in the dim light, Elijah could see the dark-haired one had the cabbage ears common among boxers. Neither of

them would be easy to take down, but he would keep a special eye on that one, who was likely as deadly with his fists as he was with his knife. Elijah's one advantage was his swordstick had a longer reach than either of their knives.

"Did someone send you?" he asked harshly, not expecting an answer but asking, anyway. Stranger things had happened. "Hire you?"

The fair one shook his head in seeming disbelief.

"Toffs." The street slang for a noble became an insult in his mouth. Not speaking further, he opted to lunge forward.

Obviously, the two had worked together before as their attack was coordinated, the fair one coming at Elijah first to engage him while the dark-haired one waited a moment longer to take advantage of his distraction. On someone else, it might have worked, but from the time he was a boy, Elijah had trained for being outnumbered, and his brothers were far better at coordinated attacks than these two thugs.

Swinging his blade back around, he twisted slightly, accepting another shallow slice—this one along his ribs—to change his position. Now, the darker-haired one was slightly behind the fair one, hindering his movement, and Elijah took swift advantage of the momentary reprieve of having to guard against them both. The swordstick flashed through the air, gleaming in the moonlight and slicing through the fair one's arm. Unlike when he hit Elijah, this was no mere flesh wound. Elijah felt the impact all the way up to his own shoulder as the sharp steel cut through to the bone.

The man screamed, dropping his knife and jerking back, sending him straight into his companion, who cursed and shoved him aside. While they might be working together, evidently, money was the critical factor rather than fellow feeling. The dark-haired one did not even look when his companion dropped to his knees, holding his hand over his arm to try to staunch the flow of blood. His fingers were splayed out, no longer able to grip the knife he had been holding.

Elijah could not rejoice for long because the dark-haired one slashed at him, far more adept than the first villain. They parried several blows, Elijah working hard to keep his back to the wall in case there was a third party waiting to rush in.

Another cut to his arm, deeper than the first, and he grit his teeth against the pain. Seeing a small opening, he took it and knocked the knife from his opponent's hands but came too close to his first adversary. The villain tripped Elijah, cut arm cradled uselessly in front of him, but going by his angry expression, he was not going to let that stop him.

Now on his back, Elijah was at a severe disadvantage, and for the first time, fear gripped his heart. He was outmatched, and he knew it, even as he rolled away from the dark-haired one, who was still standing. He tried to get some space between them so he could get back on his feet, to no avail. He kicked out, but the other man dodged nimbly, taking his time coming in, a triumphant gleam in his eye.

"Time to die, Durham." The man's use of Elijah's formal title confirmed this was no random mugging. They had been bought and paid for, sent for Elijah specifically.

A group of men stumbling out of a nearby building, drunk, loud, and rambunctious, drew the villain's attention just long enough for Elijah to jerk upward and thrust his swordstick through the man's ribs. The sickening feeling of steel sliding through flesh and the man's gurgling moan as he fell would stay with Elijah for a long after. It was not the first time he had killed, but it never got any easier.

The other man scrambled away and disappeared down one of the alleys, still cradling his arm. Elijah did not bother to chase after him. His own heart was still pounding at his close call.

The drunken revelers down the street did not even notice him kneeling there, next to a body, as they moved away. Elijah did not know whether to feel relieved or disgusted.

Heaving himself onto his feet, he picked up the cane sheath and

slid the sword back into it. He needed the cane to help him get home.

Now completely alert, he noticed every tiny sound, every small movement, his head constantly whipping around to check his progress. Not until he reached Mayfair was he was able to marginally relax. The cuts on his arms and torso stung and throbbed worse with every step, but they also helped keep him focused. He would not be caught unaware again.

Now, he would have to figure out how to deal with the distraction that was his wife.

Chapter 22

Josie

Pacing back and forth across her room, Josie muttered deprecations under her breath. The hour grew later and later, and simultaneously, she grew more worried and angrier. Where the devil was her husband?

Uncle Oliver had been unconcerned at Elijah's absence before he turned in for the night, Adam was out gallivanting, and Joseph was who knows where, and she truly did not care. If Uncle Oliver were still awake, he might have been more concerned now that it was half-past three, and Elijah was still nowhere in sight. Or perhaps he would assume Elijah was off with another woman.

Josie was sure he would not do that. He had agreed it was to be the two of them working together.

Hadn't he?

Or was she the only one who had taken their discussion at Lady Greywood's to mean that? Josie's frown deepened. They would definitely be having another discussion when he finally deigned to appear.

Her head tilted to the side. Was that a noise next door? In Elijah's room?

She rushed to the adjoining door, not bothering to press her ear against it, and jerked it open. If no one was there, then no one to

see her making a fool of herself.

She had not been wrong—he had returned. The carefully prepared lecture she'd formulated in her mind during her long wait flew out of her head when she got a good look at his bloodied torso and arms. His white shirt, hanging from his waist, was stained with blood, and the red was streaked across his skin as well. She shrieked and launched herself toward him, hands out in front of her. She drew back at the last moment, not quite touching him as her eyes darted over his body, looking for injuries.

“What happened?!” Even to her own ears, her voice sounded impossibly shrill, making Elijah wince.

“Hush.” For once, Josie did not take offense at his admonition because it was not said with authority but rather like a little boy trying not to draw attention to himself. They had their own wing of the house, but he had not called any of the servants to him or gone to his father or brothers for help. He had snuck into his room and was trying to tend to his wounds himself.

The twit.

Pressing her lips together, Josie shook her head at him as he ineffectually dabbed the injury on his side with a damp cloth. The water in the wash bin next to him was already tinged pink with his blood.

“You need a doctor.” She took the cloth from him and rubbed it over the wound, making him hiss. Looking at the laceration, she made a face. “Though it is not too deep, a stitch or two would not go amiss.” Silence met her words, and she glanced up to look at him. He was staring down at her with an expression she had never seen on his face.

“A stitch or two?” He echoed her words as if he could not believe he had heard them.

“Yes.” She looked down again and lifted the cloth, bending her head to look even closer. The bleeding had slowed substantially. She glanced at the other wounds she could see, but they had already stopped bleeding and looked far more shallow. “If you

insist on not calling the doctor, I can do it myself, but I should warn you, it has been a while. The others appear to only need a bandage.”

“It has been a while?” He sounded half-strangled, and Josie looked up at him in concern as he repeated her words for a second time.

“Yes. Did you take a blow to the head as well?” Straightening up, she went onto her tiptoes, trying to see.

Elijah

The moment was utterly surreal. Dressed in a lacy pink nightrail and wrapper, Josie was on her tiptoes, trying to see his head after she had just closely inspected his wound. Not only that, but she seemed completely confident in her ability to stitch his wounds when the entirety of Derbyshire knew of her disdain for needlework. Josie was not the type to sit about embroidering if she could help it. Yet she thought to stitch his wound? Plus, her assessment of his injuries matched his, which was even more startling.

“Since when do you stitch anything?” he asked, almost affronted he had not known that about her.

“Stitching cloth is boring. Bend your head down, so I can see if you have any injury.” The brisk way she was bossing him around made him feel this was not the first time she had tended someone’s wounds. But when the devil had she done it?

“My head is fine.” He brushed off her hands, taking back the cloth from her at the same time. Josie put her hands on her hips, scowling up at him. “I am wondering who taught you to stitch flesh when you are so well known for your abysmal needlework.”

“Evie, of course.”

“*Evie?!* ”

“If all you are going to do is repeat what I say, you might as

well keep your mouth shut and let me work.” She snatched the cloth from him and hung it on the side of the washbasin, then picked up a dry one and pressed it to his wound. The amount of pressure she put on it was surprising with its force.

Elijah tried not to scowl. It was not her fault his cousin was a hellion who had had to learn lessons he would rather not think of. After the death of his aunt and uncle, Evie’s parents, she had disappeared into the streets of London. It had been mere chance of fate that had allowed his father to find her again, years later, and by then, she had changed so much from the sweet, well-loved little girl she had been. She’d had to in order to survive.

He did not like to think about that time or how they had all grieved, worried, and searched. What they had gone through could not compare to what Evie had, and he did not like to think of that, either. It was also annoying to discover his cousin had more skills she had neglected to share with her family.

She was like a magpie, except instead of hoarding shiny objects—though she did that too, come to think of it—she hoarded facts about herself, especially about the time she spent on the streets.

“I did not know Evie had such skills, either,” he grumbled. Josie laughed lightly, lifting the pad of cloth slightly to peek under it again.

“Well, we did do our best to keep you out of things,” she said teasingly. “After all, you would have stopped us if you had known half of what we got up to.”

Groaning, Elijah covered his eyes with one hand. “I do not want to know.”

“No, you probably do not. Now, am I stitching this or not?”

“Yes, please.” He was too curious to deny her, and she was correct. A stitch or two would help it heal better and faster. He did not want to call in the doctor, or else the servants would tell his father. Then his father would want to know what happened, and Elijah would have to admit he’d gone into the Warrens without his ‘guards.’

The fact he had a better chance of finding out more on his own than with two more lords at his side would not sway his father's anger nor make up for the breach of trust. The only reason his father did not worry was he was sure Elijah would never do something so stupid. Now, he was paying the price, and he did not want his father to know.

Watching Josie work was almost hypnotic, especially since he was now wildly curious about this previously unknown skill of hers. By the time she was done, his wounds were cleaned, the two stitches were in place, the throbbing was painful but tolerable, and he was even more impressed with her skills.

"There." She stepped back and crossed her arms, raising her eyebrows. Sitting shirtless on the side of his bed, Elijah felt caught out, like a naughty schoolboy whose misdeeds had been discovered. "Now you can tell me where on earth you have been and what happened. If you do not, I will tell Uncle Oliver all about your injuries."

Bloody hell. Elijah scowled before he could halt the reaction, revealing how effective her threat was. Fortunately, he had had some time to think about how he would explain his injuries while she was patching him up. She had been so focused, she had not asked until now. Before he returned home, he had thought he would need to avoid her bed until he was healed, so at least that was no longer an issue, but he had known he would have to tell her something.

"Footpads. I was deep in thought and not paying attention to where I was going."

"And where were you going?" She scowled at him, a hint of jealousy in her expression, and Elijah realized she thought he might have gone to see another woman.

"Nowhere," he said hastily, not wanting to spark her ire.

Knowing how he felt when it came to her and Joseph, he would not wish that upon her. It would not help his cause if he ever had a hope of winning her over. Josie had already spent years trying to

get Joseph's attention, only to have him fall in love with another woman. Elijah meant to be a contrast to that, especially after her reaction to his attendance at the Society of Sin.

"After my dinner at White's, I went for a walk. Sometimes, I need to walk and wander to gather my thoughts." That actually was true, though he had not had the opportunity to do it much of late.

"Could you not have at least told me where you were going? Or that you would be out walking and not to worry?" Uncrossing her arms, she put her hands on her hips, scolding him as if he was a small boy.

Frowning, Elijah got to his feet, so she was no longer able to look down at him—rather the other way around—but she did not take even a small step back. Her ferocious scowl might have been intimidating to some. The pain from his wounds had subsided, but they were still throbbing, making him a bit testier than he might have been.

"I apologize, but you must remember I am used to being on my own, without a keeper."

"And you must remember you have a wife now," she snapped, narrowing her eyes, anger flashing in them. Her chin tilted up. "And clearly, I have reason to worry."

"This has never happened before." Hell, he was the careful one. Josie was the one always getting into scrapes. "I am fine, and I can prove it to you."

Reaching out, he caught her around the waist and pulled her flush against him, eliciting a gasp from her lips. Her robe and nightrail were gossamer thin between them, and she squished very nicely against his harder body, which hardened even more at the contact. His blood was already racing, heated from the dangers of this evening and Josie's presence. Her eyes widening as her head tipped back to stare up at him, she smacked his chest, aghast.

"I do not want to do... *that*! I am angry with you! And you are injured!"

“Trust me, I am not injured enough to stop me from wanting to do this.” Leaning down, he caught her lips. He thought she would pull away, but after a moment’s hesitation, she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him fiercely with all the pent-up frustration and anger she had accumulated.

Chapter 23

Josie

Men! And Elijah was the most infuriating of them to boot. The nitwit.

Unfortunately, she had become attached to him and had to admit there was something to be said for transmuting her anger into passion. It was hard to hold on to her temper when she was so relieved he was all right. Footpads! He was lucky he had not been injured worse.

The thought gave an extra intensity to her kiss. She clutched him, trying to find the balance between how badly she wanted to feel every inch of his body pressed against hers and the knowledge he was injured. Though, as he had said, he seemed perfectly fine now. If he was in any pain or discomfort, he was doing a good job hiding it.

When he tried to pick her up, her legs squeezed his sides, and he winced, then stumbled. Thankfully, they were close enough to the bed, they fell upon it, and he let out a low groan.

"Perfectly fine, indeed." Josie snorted.

"I am mostly fine," he conceded. "But maybe you should do the bulk of the work."

Curious, Josie rolled to her side as Elijah took off his boots and pants, enjoying watching him disrobe. He really was a fine figure

of a man, even more perfectly built than the Greek statues at the museum and far more attractive in face and form.

He carefully laid back against the pillows and crooked his finger, a small smile curving his lips. Josie crawled up the bed, allowing him to direct her, so she straddled his hips as if he was a horse. Except he was not a horse, and his very large, very erect manhood was rubbing between her thighs. Squirming, she tugged at the silky material of her gown, pulling it from between them.

“We should take this off,” he murmured.

Pushing the robe off her shoulders, she tugged the nightrail over her head, leaving her completely naked atop him. Josie’s cheeks pinked as he ran his gaze over her appreciatively. Her nipples puckered with interest, and her womanhood dampened as the length of his cock nestled between her lips.

Cupping her breasts, Elijah fondled them, making her squirm. He pinched her nipples, and she gasped at the little spurt of pain, arching her back and thrusting her breasts into his hands. Her insides clenched emptily as hot need slid through her, rising higher as he caressed her.

“Now, what do I do?” she asked hesitantly. He seemed content to play with her breasts while she remained perched atop him, but she thought she should be doing something.

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Elijah

She really was an anxious little thing. Amused but aroused, Elijah cupped her breasts and squeezed. He loved the way she wriggled atop him, stimulating both while satisfying neither of them. The tease was its own satisfaction and highly erotic.

“You let me enjoy myself.” He gave her nipples another pinch and a twist, then took mercy on her—not by loosening his grip but by giving her further direction. “Put your hands behind your head and link your fingers together.”

Her breath hitched when she realized how the position pushed her breasts out, giving him further access.

Elijah grinned, enjoying every moment of her sensual torment. Truthfully, it gave him time to catch his breath. Despite his boasting, when he'd tried to lift her, and her legs had pressed into his side against his injury, it had been pure agony. It still throbbed, though the growing need for his passion was beginning to diminish the pain by comparison. Playing with her breasts was arousing both of them.

"Elijah..." She breathed out his name as he pinched her nipples harder, head tipping back, squirming even harder against his cock, coating his length with her slick arousal. The tease of being between her lips but not inside her body was its own sweet agony and far preferable to the actual pain from his injuries.

"Take the pain for me, minx." He pinched harder, making her whimper, and her eyes fluttered shut. His cock pulsed against her wet folds, aching to be buried inside. He needed the validation he was here, alive, hale and hearty when at one point tonight he really had thought he was done for. "I want to see you writhing on my cock."

Another whimper, more squirming, then she panted for breath when he released the tender buds, and they plumped up again, redder and more swollen.

Sliding his hands down to her hips, he gripped and lifted her.

"Up, Josie. You are going to mount me."

Blue eyes flew open, meeting his, filled with shock and curiosity. Elijah shifted his hips until the sensitive head of his cock was at her entrance, then he relaxed his hands, letting her find her seat atop him. Her pink lips dropped open in perfect 'o' as she sank onto him. In this position, Elijah was able to watch every minute change of expression as she impaled herself on his raging erection.

Josie

Oh, glory...

The sensation of sliding down onto Elijah was even more acute than the times he had been on top of or behind her. It was both exhilarating and embarrassing. She could feel his eyes on her, and there was no hiding any part of her body from him. Her breasts bounced slightly as she panted, her inner muscles clenching and gripping his thick shaft as she took it within her.

Hands splayed across his muscled chest helped to balance her physically but did nothing to help her emotionally or mentally. She was careful to avoid his wounds, but she still worried about hurting him. Despite his confidence, this was the best arrangement.

And saying she was going to mount him...

She did not know if she would ever be able to ride astride again without blushing furiously and remembering this moment. He was certainly not as wide as a horse, but the movements were similar as his hands lifted her up and fell down again as she rocked against him.

It only took a few moments before Josie moved without his assistance, her passion driving her forward. Every time they had coupled before, Elijah had been in charge of their pace, their rhythm, and while she found that wonderfully exciting, there was also something to be said for moving the way *she* wanted to. Moaning, Josie shuddered as she glanced down to see him avidly watching her with the most lustful expression.

That aroused her even further, her skin warming as she felt his heated gaze over her body and the way his hands traveled up from her hips to her breasts. Josie sighed with pleasure as he fondled her, her body moving atop his at a steady pace, akin to a canter.

"Good girl." Elijah's voice was low and husky. His fingers pinched and firmly tugged her nipples, helping her to move in the direction he wanted. Josie hissed under her breath at the sting of pain that throbbed through her, straight to her core. Her nipples were already sensitive from all the pinching and twisting and

responded even stronger now that he had returned to tormenting them. "Ride me, minx."

The command made her blush. This was not like riding a horse, but her long hours of doing so certainly helped her now. She rose and fell above him with only the slightest protest from her muscles.

Other than his hands on her breasts, he let her take the lead, her ardor driving her to move faster and faster atop him, her body grinding down, so all her sensitive bits rubbed against his as her pleasure climbed higher and higher.

"Faster." His hand released her breast, swatting her bottom, and the sting added to the delicious sensations coursing through her. Josie moved harder, faster as he spanked her flanks, peppering her flesh with little swats that made her even more excited.

When she reached her peak, crying out as she writhed atop him in ecstasy, he took control.

He heaved underneath her, hands falling to her hips to hold her in place as he thrust up inside her, sending a paroxysm of pleasure through her already exultant senses. Josie spasmed at the surge of sensation, her head falling back as Elijah moved her, his body heaving beneath hers, thrusting up and in, filling her oh-so-wonderfully.

As she was already at her climax, the addition of new sensations and Elijah's taking control sent her reeling, the pleasure almost too much to bear. Tears slid over her cheeks from the sheer intensity of the pleasure gripping her. She might be riding him, but he was still the one holding the reins.

When he surged one final time, his hands holding her tightly against his groin, filling her with his seed, Josie shuddered, then collapsed, panting on his chest.

Sore and aching all over, his wounds throbbed even more, and he was far more out of breath than he should have been, but with Josie laying atop him, also out of breath and completely satisfied, he had to grin. She certainly should have no complaints, despite his injuries.

“Mmm.” Nuzzling his shoulder, she tucked her head into the crook between his neck and his head. “I am still angry with you.” The small bite in her voice was completely ruined when she ended the sentence with a yawn.

“Oh, yes, I can tell.” He ran his hand over the smooth skin of her back, fighting back his own yawn. He needed to send her back to her own room, but having her cuddled against him felt far too nice. A little longer would not hurt anything. The servants were all abed, so there would be no one to see or gossip.

Here in his arms, he knew exactly where she was and that she was safe, and after tonight, he needed that reassurance.

“No more walking at night without telling someone where you are or preferably, taking someone with you.” He made a noncommittal noise, and her tiny finger poked at his chest. “I mean it. Or else I will be the one going out at night to look for you.”

A growl of displeasure rumbled through his chest, and his hand—which had been trailing his fingers over her lower back—slid down to grip the curve of her buttocks.

“Try it, and you will not sit for a week,” he threatened, meaning every word. His blood ran cold at the thought of Josie out at night, searching the streets for him. What if she had done so tonight and found her way into the Warrens? She was impetuous enough to do it.

Josie scoffed, not threatened at all. She could not see his expression from where she was tucked against his chest, but Elijah frowned. Had the past few nights without any of his more deviant desires given her a false sense of security when it came to his threats of discipline?

Well, he would have to fix that immediately. Closing his eyes,

Elijah patted his wife's bottom. Rather than tensing, her breathing slowed and evened out. She was falling asleep on his chest. He held back a snort. Some disciplinarian he was turning out to be.

There was another Society of Sin event coming up. By which time he should be fully healed and able to do exactly what he wished with her, if not before then. Though if she did misbehave between now and then, he would have no qualm about turning her over his knee.

Thoughts drifting, he did not even realize how exhausted he was, falling asleep before he could return Josie to her room.

Chapter 24

Josie

“Bloody hell!” The explosive curse, combined with the sudden lack of warmth surrounding her, had Josie lurching to wakefulness. Sitting up straight in bed, disoriented, she cast a frantic gaze around, but all she saw was Elijah rolling away from her, wincing as he did so.

The evening came back to her in a rush—her worried pacing to his return home and his injuries to their lovemaking before falling asleep in his bed. That was partly why she was so disoriented. She was in his room for the first time, and she had spent the entire night there, wrapped up in his arms. That was why she was cold—he had rolled away from her, depriving her of his warmth.

She could not be too angry when she saw the bandages and was reminded of his wounds.

“Are you all right? What hurts?” Going onto her knees, Josie let the sheet drop. The curtains were still drawn, though she could see sunlight coming in through the edges, letting her know it was well into the morning. She was surprised Daisy had not—oh right. Of course. Daisy would have checked Josie’s room and, not finding her there, would be waiting until Josie reappeared.

“Nothing!” Elijah snapped, turning with a glare that had Josie rocking back on her heels and snatching the covers back up to hold

against her as if they were some kind of protection. The look in his eyes softened, but he still had storm clouds over his face, clearly upset about something.

“Then what on earth is the matter?”

“You slept in here last night!”

Josie’s jaw dropped open. Really?! That was what he was making such a fuss about? Her presence in his bed? The pain that lanced through her chest was sharper than a knife, stabbing deep and emanating outward. Despite how angry she had been at him last night, falling asleep in his bed had felt like a new step forward, like an emotional hurdle they had overcome together, and an indication his feelings for her had grown along similar lines as hers for him. Discovering otherwise was gutwrenching.

“What does that matter?” she snapped, tightening her hold on the bedsheets as she scooted back and off the other side of the bed, wrapping them around her. If he was going to snap at her, he did not get to look at her nudity. It also made her feel less vulnerable.

“I did not mean that the way it sounded.” Elijah scrubbed his hands through his dark hair, leaving it wild and sticking up on top. Another time, she might have giggled, but right now, she was too hurt and angry to find amusement in his appearance. Unlike her, he seemed perfectly comfortable naked as he paced back and forth. “But Devon saw you.”

Devon was Elijah’s valet, a perfectly affable chap and hardly the kind of prig who would take issue with them sharing Elijah’s room rather than sleeping separately, as was fashionable. Even if he had been, Josie could not see the issue. Why should they care what the valet thought? She wanted to keep Daisy’s good opinion, but if Daisy were to judge her for something, which was none of her business, that would hardly be Josie’s problem.

“Oh, well, sound the alarm. The valet knows we slept in the same bed.” Extremely grumpy now, Josie stalked toward her door. She did not have to sit there and take this abuse. The inside of her chest ached as though she had been dealt a physical blow, far

deeper and more painful than any hurt Joseph had ever managed to inflict on her. Elijah could hurt her far worse because her feelings for him had become far deeper... for all the good that knowledge did her.

“He could tell someone, and that could put you in danger!” Elijah roared, throwing his hands out.

Josie spun about to look at him, eyes widening in shock, as much at his loss of control as his words.

“Me in danger?” That did not make any sense. How could sleeping in Elijah’s bed put her in danger?

As if only now realizing what he had just said, Elijah suddenly straightened up, his mouth snapping shut and jaw clenching. Josie scowled, taking a step toward him.

“What on earth did you mean by that, Elijah?”

Elijah

Hell and damnation. He was never at his best first thing in the morning, and this particular morning, he might even be at his worst. Thrown off by Josie’s presence in his bed, too worried to watch his tongue, and not thinking about the consequences, he had blurted out the truth.

“Elijah.”

Josie snapped out his name, and he pressed the heels of his hands to his temples. Why did it suddenly feel like his head was pounding? He had not imbibed much the night before, yet it felt as though he’d swallowed a whole barrel of ale. From the moment Devon had opened the door—immediately closing it, waking Elijah up enough to wonder why, then realizing it was because Devon had seen Josie in his bed and had chosen not to disturb them—it was as though his whole brain stopped.

“Elijah, don’t you dare ignore me!”

“The note I received on our wedding day threatened my life,”

he finally answered, unable to think of a reason not to at this juncture. He had meant to keep her well out of things, but she would be like a dog with a bone if he did not fess up now. "It clearly was directed at me, and only me, after I married you and thwarted the traitor's plan to distract my father with a scandal between you and Joseph."

Her face went from pink with anger to sickly pale.

"You should have told me!"

"What good would that have done, other than worry you?" Elijah asked, throwing his hands up. Of course, that was her response, illogical though it was.

"How would you feel if I told you I had received a threat upon my life weeks ago, too?" Josie spat out the words, and Elijah froze.

He had not even considered the possibility, which now seemed like a massive oversight. Josie had not been a part of the threat. He did not want Josie to be part of the threat. No matter what happened to him, he needed to know she was safe.

"When?" he demanded, springing into action and virtually leaping toward her across the room. Clutching the bedsheets to her chest with one hand, she held up the other, shaking her head.

"I did not say I had. I asked how you would feel. That answers that."

She scowled up at him, which did nothing to help his temper. Now, not only his head was pounding, but his heart as well at the mere thought she had been in danger, and he had not known.

"That is different! I am your husband. It is my job to protect you."

"It is not different at all! It is not about protection. It is about trust! It is about sharing our lives together instead of moving about the same house as strangers, only coming together at night in the bedroom." Despite her deshabelle state, Josie looked like a haughty queen as she railed at him, her cheeks flushed with emotion, blue eyes glittering.

He could not gainsay her since he had not been thinking in

those terms, but she was absolutely right. Elijah gaped at her like a speechless fish.

After a long moment of staring wordlessly at each other, she made an exasperated sound and stomped through the door adjoining their rooms. The ends of the bedsheet trailed after her until she whisked them through, right before slamming the door and locking it.

Elijah stared dumbly at the wood barrier between them, which had taken on a new significance. He was used to being yelled at by Josie, sniped at, bossed, grumbled, teased... but not her silence.

He had a lot of thinking to do.

Josie

The blundering nitwit. Dashing tears from her eyes, Josie sniffled.

"My lady?" Daisy's concerned tones cut through Josie's bout of self-pity. Getting to her feet from where she had been sitting in a chair, Daisy hurried over.

"I am fine, Daisy. Just... husbands are a lot of work." Elijah in particular. Daisy's lips quirked, her demeanor relaxing as she slipped the bedsheet off Josie and cast a scrutinizing eye over her mistress' body and finding no injuries. What would she have thought if she had seen Josie's spanked bottom last week? That would certainly make for an interesting conversation.

If it ever happened again.

Yesterday, the idea would have made her flushed and excited, tingling between her legs. This morning, she felt nothing but sad and frustrated. How could Elijah have kept something so important to her? And how the devil had she forgotten the note in the first place?

Oh, she knew. The same way she had this morning. He had dazzled and distracted her with passion and pleasure. She had been

focusing on her growing feelings for him more than anything else while he had been doing... well, his spy things. Josie did not like to think of herself as self-involved, but in this case, that was exactly what she had been—focused on her relationship with him and apparently blind to and forgetful of everything else.

She knew he did not believe she and her friends should be involved in something so dangerous as hunting a traitor, but that was hardly the same thing as not telling his wife there had been a threat against his life. His brothers knew. His father knew. They had all read the note before Elijah had tucked it away.

Well, Josie was not the type to stew in her own silence without letting her displeasure be known. Last night, he had distracted her with passion and pleasure, or she would have thought to question him then. He had used her body's senses and reactions against her.

Scowling, she thought hard for a long moment.

"Daisy, I will break my fast in here. Please have cook send up a tray," she said finally, her thoughts racing. Let Elijah stew in his own thoughts for a bit. If Uncle Oliver was at the table, or either of his brothers, they would want to know where she was, then Elijah could explain himself to them. The men. Who mattered.

She ground her teeth.

What she truly needed was some advice on how to manage such a hard-headed man. Thankfully, Mary and Lily would be at Lady Chesterham's tea in a few hours, and she could corner Mary there. Of course, Rex loved Mary, so it was not the entirely same, but Josie did not know who else to turn to. Rex was as bossy as Elijah and not easy to manage. Besides, Mary and Lily had both known Elijah for as long as Josie had.

"Yes, my lady," Daisy said. "Would you like to dress before I fetch your tray?"

"Yes, please. The blue jonquil, I think." It would be light and airy on this warm day and perfect for tea. She did not need heavy fabric weighing her down—her own thoughts were more than enough.

Elijah

“What did you do?”

Both of his brothers and his father glared at him from around the table after they had been informed Josie would not be joining them for breakfast. They had all caught the glance her maid had sent Elijah when she peeked her head in to whisper to the footman, who had passed the message on.

He had been waiting on tenterhooks for her to come down and join them, formulating both an apology and an explanation. Planning to ask her to walk with him after she had broken her fast, so they could speak about how they wanted to live. Something they had not done with the whirlwind of events that had precipitated their marriage. Hell, if they had done so before their wedding, or even immediately after, he would not have known what he wanted from her.

Now he did, and it was not that he wanted them to lead completely separate lives, far from it. He had not known, could not have known, back then that he would feel this way now. So, he would apologize for leaving her out and hope she would understand he was not used to having to be a true partner to someone and that he would try to do better.

Except she was not here. Only his brothers and his father, all

glaring suspiciously at him and awaiting his explanation—probably as Josie planned. Despite his annoyance, a thread of amusement at his minx’s machinations trickled through.

He did not explain *how* it had come up since, so far, he had managed to conceal his injuries from the rest of his family, but he did admit he accidentally let the threat on his life slip to Josie and that she had not taken being left out very well. Adam and Joseph scoffed, shaking their heads and sitting back, evidently no longer blaming him.

“Of course, you did not tell her,” Joseph said. “She, Mary, and Lily are already far too involved in everything, thanks to Evie. If you had, they would have been sticking their noses into everything about the note.”

“Not to mention, what could she do but worry?” Adam shrugged, picking up a piece of toast to nibble on.

Only Father was silent. Elijah turned his head to look at him. Staring off into the distance somewhere at the end of the room, Father’s eyes were unfocused, as though he was seeing something none of them could.

“Father?” Joseph asked, frowning. Adam looked up, noticing their father was not in agreement with them.

“I would have told your mother,” Father admitted, giving his head a little shake and refocusing his attention on his sons. They all gaped at him. Father was the one who had drilled it into their heads that the women were to be kept well out of everything and protected, the way they had not been able to protect Evie after her parents died.

“But... why?” Joseph sounded almost lost at the realization Father would have done things differently. Elijah felt the same. He had not thought about it at the time, but he had assumed he was acting as his father would have in the same situation.

“Because your mother and I were partners.” Father looked down at his plate for a moment, then back up, taking a moment to get his emotions under control. He did not often speak of their

mother. Adam was already leaning forward, hanging on his every word. Being the youngest, he had the fewest memories of her. “I know it is not common among our set to marry for love, but we did love each other. We were part of each other’s lives, and I would not have hidden something so important from her, nor would she from me.”

“Josie did ask me how I would react if she had received a similar threat and kept it from me.” Which still stuck like a pebble in his gut. Josie had been absolutely correct. The others all bristled at the idea. “I did not think of things like that. I wanted to leave her out of it entirely.”

“That is how many of our peers operate in their marriage,” his father said with a kind, sympathetic smile, which made Elijah feel even worse. “There is no shame in that.”

Except Elijah did not want a marriage like his peers. At least, not the peers his father was talking about. He wanted more than that. It had just taken him a while to realize it.

Joseph looked as if he was thinking deeply and was not entirely comfortable with his thoughts. So, at least Elijah was not alone.

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### *Josie*

Lady Chesterham’s tea was well attended, but it was easy enough to find a secluded corner where she could drag Mary and Lily, so they could speak more privately. There were many small tables set up around the patio and gardens, so the ladies could gather just outside the house if they preferred or wander through the flowerbeds and admire the scenery.

Josie thought the setup was rather inspired since she was not the type who enjoyed sitting and chatting for hours at a time. She would much rather get up and move. She appreciated Lady Chesterham’s foresight, especially since it gave her the opportunity to speak with her friends without the gossips listening in.

There was plenty of gossip flying, as there usually was at the teas. Josie thought the ladies needed the tea to keep their throats from drying out after all the flapping their tongues did. Thankfully, there were no gentlemen about, so Lily's mother and godmother did not protest when Josie wanted to speak with Lily privately.

Parasols up to protect their skin from the sun, which was shining very brightly today, Josie led Mary and Lily to a corner at the edge of the garden, their backs against the hedges so they could see anyone coming upon them. Josie quickly revealed the events of the night before. Well, some of them.

The thought occurred, she could pay Elijah back by revealing his injuries to them, but she had decided against it. It might bring momentary satisfaction but nothing else. She would take the high road and demonstrate to Elijah what it meant to be a true partner, keeping his trust and his secrets.

She did tell Mary and Lily about her discovery there had been a threat against his life in the note from their wedding day. It made her feel better when both of them were aghast; they had forgotten about it as well.

"There has been a great deal going on, and nothing came of it," Mary said comfortingly. Out of the three of them, Lily seemed the most upset such an important detail had completely slipped her mind. She had always considered herself a keeper of information.

"Nothing that we know of," Josie replied darkly. Of course, something had come of it, with Elijah being attacked last night, but it was always possible there had been other attempts he had hidden from her. Something she would have to ask him about. Maybe she should not bother if he was going to hide things from her. He might not even tell the truth.

She wanted to be the person he did not hide anything from.

"I still cannot believe we completely forgot," Lily muttered balefully. She brushed some of the dark strands of hair back from her face, a little wrinkle forming on her brow, and Josie knew she was committing today's conversation to memory to make up for

forgetting the note the last time. "I will need to update my notes."

"See? That was the problem. You were not able to do so right away because you were at my wedding brunch." Josie grinned as Lily glared at her, not at all soothed. That was Lily, though. She really was a bit lost without her notes. Josie sighed. "I do not know what to do. I am not even sure how Elijah feels about me or what he thinks about me, considering I wanted to marry Joseph not even a month ago."

"And how *do* you feel about Elijah?" Mary asked softly, a knowing smile curving the edges of her lips.

"I am falling in love with him, fickle creature that I am." Josie twirled her parasol above her head, avoiding her friends' gazes. They had begun to speak of such things during her last conversation with them, but she had not been ready to confess that truth then... she was now. She had been too hurt this morning by his actions to believe her feelings for him were anything else.

Lily scoffed.

"We have already been over this. You are not fickle. You have discovered the man you thought you wanted was not as suited to you as the man you married. There is nothing wrong with that."

The assertion dismissed so firmly in Lily's brusque, sensible voice made Josie smile, although it did not entirely banish her own concerns.

"Then why does it feel like I should have realized all of this a long time ago?"

"You were too close to the situation to properly analyze it," Lily said immediately. "And a bit too sentimental."

Josie scowled at her friend. She loved Lily like a sister, but like sisters, they sometimes fought. Lily said Josie was too emotional, whereas Josie felt Lily could be rather cold when it came to empathizing with others.

One day, Lily was going to meet someone who made her feel deeply, and Josie was going to be there to witness it and rub her nose in it... just a little.



“Yes, well. It has also made me aware I have been remiss in my investigative duties.” She made a face. “Not that the gentlemen ever talk about anything important when I am about. Since I joined the household, they have become far more careful about what they say in private.” That and they were doubtless saving their conversations for when she was out of the house, like now. Newly wed to a future Marquess, there were certain social obligations she could not ignore.

“You should try starting a conversation with them about what we want to know,” Mary suggested. She twirled her parasol thoughtfully. “Ask Elijah about Talbot and Captain Jones. That should be innocuous enough, especially if he does not suspect Captain Jones.”

True. Josie had already meant to, but she had become distracted.

“Have the two of you learned anything further?” she asked and felt relieved, then guilty when both Mary and Josie shook their heads.

“Only that Collins did not have any close friends in the Society,” Mary said, making a little face. “Which I already knew from Rex, but I did want to make sure he had not missed anything. He had no reason to pay attention to Collins before all of this. Unfortunately, Carlisle has departed from London, and I do not think he will be back. I cannot blame him, but there are some questions I wish I could ask him. Rex and I will be touring his estates for our honeymoon as soon as the Season is over. We will find a reason to visit Carlisle’s estates.”

Something else Josie had not thought about—her honeymoon with Elijah. They were taking one, were they not? Probably round to his estates as well. That seemed like the dutiful thing to do. She would rather go to France, but since he had not asked, she would end up doing whatever he decided.

“Do you feel like this Season is slipping by us too fast, and you cannot keep up?” When she had thought of coming to London for

her Season, she had dreamed of balls, of Joseph falling in love with her, of gentlemen thronging about her. Well, some of that had happened, but it did seem as though events moved so much faster here than in the country, and she could scarcely keep up. What she really needed was a good, long gallop on a horse. That was how she always did her best thinking.

City living had stuffed her head full of wool. The hours were exhausting, the pace draining, and though she loved the social aspects, she craved some time to herself to sit and think. No wonder she was forgetting so many things—she hardly had time to take a moment for herself.

“Absolutely,” Mary said with a sigh. “I think my Uncle Henry has the right of it, only coming to London every other Season. If Rex is amenable, perhaps we shall follow that example in the future.”

“Trust me, I am very glad this is my one and only season.” Lily turned her head, casting her gaze among the other guests at the tea. Although she appeared to fit in, with her lacy lavender gown and flowered bonnet, parasol at exactly the proper angle held in her dainty gloved hands, Josie knew Lily had been miserable with the constant socializing the Season required. “I will not be returning, no matter what Momma and my godmother want.”

“Perhaps you should hurry and find a husband before the end of this Season,” Josie teased. “That way, you will be able to do as you please.”

Lily made a face. “I will do as I please once I am home and without having a husband to manage. Both you and Mary have been extremely distracted since your marriages. Such a union seems more of a burden, despite the pleasurable compensation you have derived.”

Much as Josie would have liked to argue, there really was too much truth in Lily’s words. She *had* been distracted, but from here on, she was determined to fix it. Elijah had done her a favor this morning. She was certain she would find him far less distracting

from now on.

## Chapter 26

Elijah

Venturing into Hyde Park atop Maximus, a glossy chestnut steed purchased last year at Newmarket, Elijah ignored the admiring looks from the carriages lined up along Rotten Row. The *grande dames* of the *ton* watched and gossiped from their barouches with debutantes and their mommas wedged between them.

The sandy path along the row was packed today, probably because everyone wanted to take full advantage of the pleasant weather. The riding paths through the park were equally congested. Elijah frowned as he made his way, looking this way and that for Josie's apple-red riding gown and matching hat. She should stand out, even in this crowd, but he did not see her as of yet.

She must have been desperate to come here—whether for a ride, to be out of Stuart House, or both.

Hyde Park was not a place one could really *ride*, especially at the fashionable hour, and Josie was the type to want to gallop. Coming here, now, would be more of an exercise in frustration for her than anything else.

It was for him as well, mostly because it was so difficult to find the blasted woman. How was he supposed to sufficiently apologize if she would not even speak to him? Tonight, they had dinner at

the Carstairs, followed by a ball at the Rochesters. Possibly, he could pull her aside for a conversation, but that was hardly ideal.

The door between their rooms was still locked. Unless he was of a mind to forcibly enter her room—an idea he immediately discounted—he would likely remain locked out tonight unless he could satisfactorily apologize beforehand.

A flash of red caught his eye. Maximus whinnied a small protest when Elijah pulled a little too hard on the reins when his head whipped around. There she was, riding sedately and discontented on one of the bridal paths by the hedges. Elijah's groom trailed just behind Calpurnia, her spirited filly, who looked nearly as miserable as her rider.

Neither of them was meant to be plodding along. Josie had owned Calpurnia for three years, and Elijah had seen how the two of them moved together through the fields at home. They were even more in tune than he and Maximus, who immediately whickered when Elijah turned his head, and the horse caught sight of Calpurnia.

Sometimes, Elijah would swear his horse had a crush on Josie's mare, if such a thing was possible. Without his prompting, Maximus picked up the pace to a fast walk and headed straight for Josie and Calpurnia, causing a small stir as he moved a little faster than the rest of the crowd around him.

Josie looked up, their eyes met, and something inside his chest twinged. There was a sadness to her gaze, one he had never seen before, and he knew it was his fault. Before he could truly process it, she had already pushed a smile onto her lips, but it was not a real smile. Her lips had curved, but her eyes did not sparkle, and her cheeks did not lift.

"My lady," he said, maneuvering Maximus when he reached her, so they were next to each other rather than facing one another. "I came to join you for your ride."

"I was just finishing." Josie avoided looking at him directly, keeping her gaze on his chest. To passersby, it would appear to be

a congenial conversation between newly wedded husband and wife, but Elijah could feel the tension coming off her. Yes, she was still upset with him.

“Then I shall escort you,” he replied, rather than taking the hint that she preferred to be left alone. Nose in the air, affecting a haughty demeanor, Josie nodded begrudgingly. They rode in silence, Elijah casting glances at her while she did her best to ignore him. He could only imagine what the groom behind them made of their interactions.

Part of him thought any gossip from his household about a rift between the two of them might be helpful to counteract anything Devon or Daisy might let slip. He had a private word with them this morning about not discussing his and Josie’s sleeping arrangements, and both swore, of course, they would not.

Elijah wanted to believe them, but he also knew it was possible the traitor had someone watching them from inside their own household. Paranoia? Perhaps. But after Josie had been set up by a letter from the false Joseph, Elijah felt it was justified.

Once they reached the stables, Elijah swiftly dismounted and came over to help Josie down. She pursed her lips in annoyance but did not protest. Both of them knew she did not need his help, even in her riding skirts while seated sidesaddle, but to make a fuss about something most ladies would require and enjoy would disturb the grooms. Josie would never do that.

Instead, she would hold it all inside until she could unload her ire... if it got to that.

The moment they exited the stables, leaving the grooms and horses behind, and Elijah could see there was a clear path with no one about to the house, he escorted Josie far enough they were between the two structures and away from prying ears, then halted.

*Josie*

Simmering with frustration and resentment over Elijah's continued high-handedness, the last thing she expected when he brought them to a halt was for him to turn to her and apologize.

"I am sorry."

There they were—the words she very much wanted to hear yet had not expected to. She blinked in surprise, taken aback, then frowned suspiciously.

"What are you sorry for?" For all she knew, he was apologizing for interrupting her ride. The little smile that curved his lips did *not* make her heart beat faster, ignoring that her pulse had sped up.

"I am sorry for not telling you about the danger I was in. I should have."

Josie waited, but he did not add an addendum. It was nothing more than a simple apology, with no excuses, and it took her by surprise.

However, it did not contain everything she wanted, which was a reassurance she would not be so left out in the future. Only partly mollified, Josie crossed her arms, giving him her best gimlet stare. Not that she expected it to have much effect on his hardheadedness.

"And you will make sure you keep me fully informed in the future," she said, prompting him.

Elijah hesitated, but only for a moment, before nodding.

"I will keep you fully informed in the future."

"And will answer the questions I have right now."

This time he laughed outright, but he nodded again, offering her his arm, and she took it. She could not help smiling as well, though the caution remained. He had already broken her trust once, and it would take some time to build it back up. She would be a fool to think it was this easy but would take advantage of what he was offering. Whether he could be trusted not to keep her out of things in the future, well... time would tell.

"Are you taking precautions for your safety?" If he was not,

they were going to have another fight right now, and she would not hesitate to tell Uncle Oliver everything. Trust extended only so far as sensible behavior, and with a threat against his life and him wandering about the streets of London alone after dark... well, that was hardly sensible.

Elijah heaved a sigh.

"I can take care of myself, despite what you and my father think," he said grumpily. Josie was relieved to hear she was not the only one so concerned. "Anthony and Nathan are supposed to serve as my guards most of the time, and my father was going to put a man on me whenever they were unavailable."

"Then where were they last night?" The question came out a bit more sharply than intended, her hackles rising at Nathan's name. If Lily's correspondents were correct, and the Talbot estate was involved in some kind of nefarious activity, was the brother of the Earl of Talbot the best choice for a guard?

"I did not tell anyone I was leaving the house." If he had, someone would have been sure to accompany him.

Josie pulled away, whirling to face him as he opened the side door to the house for her.

"That. Will. Not. Do." She jabbed him in the chest with her finger, one jab for each word. She glared up at him when he grabbed her hand, keeping her from poking him again. "Next time you decide to go 'thinking' about the streets of London at night, you will inform me, *and* you will take a guard with you, so I do not have to worry the whole time."

Elijah lifted her hand to his lips, kissing her knuckles, and Josie eyed him suspiciously.

"As you wish, my lady," he said before turning to escort her indoors.



There was something freeing about telling Josie everything, and he finally understood what his father had said about marriage being a partnership. Of course, he did not want Josie rushing into danger or joining him in his investigations, but he felt a great sense of relief at no longer having to hide anything from her. Hearing her worry over him warmed him from the inside out.

Not that he thought she would be uncaring, especially after her upset about his injuries, but it seemed her emotions were far more in line with his own than he might have guessed. Did he dare hope he had already fully supplanted his brother in her affections? Or at least carved out his own place at least equal to Joseph's in her heart?

"Tell me about Anthony and Nathan." Though she was allowing him to lead her into the house, she was clearly not ready to let go of their conversation just yet, and Elijah had no qualms about that. Talking about his friends was something he could do without worrying about who was listening. Still, in case the conversation turned, he directed her down the hall to his study. The servants were moving about the household, cleaning and tending to their duties, preparing for supper and the end of the day.

"I met both of them through my father." He knew she would understand they were already working for his father when he met them. Their friendships had grown from there. "They were both captains in the Army and served together in France. Anthony is half-French, so he was particularly well-suited to the assignment."

As operatives of White Hall, neither of them had actually served with a battalion but had performed their duties in a far more dangerous manner, often alone. They had both saved many lives by risking their own for the information they obtained and even foiled more than one plot to put England and France at odds with each other yet again. Elijah was convinced they had prevented outright war, though they would never know for certain.

"Is he a second son?" The question was natural, as many of the *ton's* second sons entered the service. Joseph had not, but that was

because he was serving England in a different manner, the same as Elijah and Adam.

“No, his parents are merchants.” Solidly middle class, Anthony had slowly amassed a small fortune over the years with investments, something Elijah did not mention. He glanced down at Josie, but she did not seem perturbed by Anthony’s lower social status. Reaching his study, Elijah opened the door for her.

“And Nathan?” she asked as she walked past him, meandering to the chairs in front of his desk and settling down in one as Elijah answered.

“Ah, now he is a second son. His brother is the Earl of Talbot.” He followed behind her, seating himself in the chair across from hers. The masculine leather wingback nearly swallowed her, but she seemed perfectly comfortable, leaning on the arm thoughtfully.

“The previous Earl passed away recently, did he not?” A shadow flickered across her expression, and Elijah frowned. He had not realized the families were acquainted. The late earl had had little to do with polite society. A wastrel and a stain on the family name was how Nathan had described him. There had been no love lost between father and sons.

“He did.” Elijah knew his tone was short, and Josie looked at him questioningly, prompting him to provide an explanation. “This must not go past your ears—not even to your friends. The new earl is currently dealing with the debts his father left him. Part of the reason Nathan is in London is to manage things here while his brother tends to the mess the earl left the estates in.”

“Oh.” Josie’s eyes widened. “Oh.” Elijah nodded a bit grimly. He was showing a good deal of trust in her, telling her of the family’s troubles. The *ton* did not look kindly upon those in dire financial straits. An odd expression flitted across her face, and she appeared tentative, not a word he would have ever used for Josie. “You trust Captain Jones, even though he has financial difficulties?”

“With my life, as I have in the past. We have saved each other

more than once.” He understood what she was hinting at, considering they knew the traitor was someone who knew the family, and those in financial predicaments could sometimes be bought, but Nathan was a man of impeccable honor. “You will understand once you get to know him better. Nathan would rather die than behave dishonorably.”

“What about his brother?”

“We have never met, but Nathan trusts him implicitly, and I trust his judgment. The two of them are determined to be the opposite of everything their father was.” Elijah hesitated then decided there was no harm in asking for reciprocity. “Now that I have shared, what about you... when was the last time you saw Evie?”

The smile that crossed Josie’s face was almost wicked. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Well, I have not seen her since our wedding day.”

Elijah blinked, his jaw dropping open. Evie had been there on their *wedding day*?

# Elijah

The new accord between himself and Josie made attending Joseph and Miss Bliss' engagement ball much easier on Elijah's nerves than he might have felt otherwise. There was now more than passion between them. There was a partnership, and they were no longer working at odds. She had told him what Evie knew, which had not been much more than Elijah had already known.

The only point they had hit a difficulty with was Lily's correspondence pointing to the Talbot estates. Though Elijah could believe it of the old earl, he was certain Nathan and his brother would have nothing to do with smuggling spies or other personages. Smuggling was basically an honored pastime along the coast and had been particular lucrative during wartime, supplementing incomes, and often the sons of the local nobility would be hip deep in the proceedings. Nathan had told more than one story about his time with the smuggling gang that operated out of the village next to his father's manor.

Smugglers had their own sense of honor—usually—which did not involve betraying their country. However, there were always exceptions. Worse than the smugglers were the wreckers—those who used lighthouses and other means to draw merchant ships in too close to the rocks, marooning them, slaughtering the crews,

taking the wares, then sinking the ships. There would be wreckers and some smugglers who could be bought for the right price.

Josie still seemed skeptical, but she did not know Nathan the way he did. The one thing he kept from her was Nathan's suspicions about Lily. He could not see what it would help and had a feeling it would only make Josie take up even more against Nathan. If Elijah's reaction to Nathan's questions had been immediate denial, Josie's would be even more so. She was not entirely soothed about Nathan.

"They do make a lovely couple," Lily said approvingly, from the other side of Josie, as they watched Joseph lead Miss Bliss onto the dance floor. Miss Bliss, always beautifully turned out, was resplendent tonight in a rose-and-gold gown and her blonde hair pinned in a torrent of curls, with a beaming smile as she stared up at his brother. Joseph was grinning like a fool at her as they began their celebratory waltz while everyone looked on.

As beautiful as Miss Bliss looked, Elijah thought his wife far outdid her. Josie was dressed in a turquoise blue that made her eyes shine like jewels, her hair lifted off her delicate neck, making him want to stroke his fingers along the nape, and a low neckline that hinted more than displayed and was driving him wild.

"They do." Josie smiled serenely, her arm brushing against Elijah's as she unconsciously swayed toward him in time to the music. If they were alone, he would wrap his arms around her, but to do so here would cause a stir among the guests, and he did not want to take attention away from his brother. Joseph deserved this moment, especially since, for a while, they were not sure it would happen. She leaned forward, peering around Elijah at Adam. "What do you think, Adam, shall you end this Season with a bride as well?"

"Do not wish such things upon me, sister." Adam shuddered, shaking his head. "I am far too young for your plots."

Giggling, Josie settled back into position, Lily and Mary laughing beside her. A little pang struck Elijah. Evie was the only

one missing from their little coterie, and he felt her absence as much as they must. He scanned the assemblage, looking for her. Knowing she had appeared at both Mary's and Josie's weddings, he thought she must be nearby tonight. Unless she was waiting for the actual wedding rather than the engagement ball, but his gut told him she was here, only in hiding.

He and Father had left her out of the family business, and now she was not part of the family for all the important events happening this Season because she did not feel she could show herself to them. Elijah vowed when she made her presence known to him again, he would welcome her back without recriminations or scolding and maybe even talk to Father about including her more. Not the way she wanted to be, but they could find a compromise, the way he had with Josie. She did not need to go on missions to be useful. She could help in the home office.

In the meantime... His eyes dropped down to his wife's décolletage, stirring his arousal again. Seeing the proof in her eyes that she was no longer pining for Joseph, realizing she was perfectly happy at Elijah's side was having an effect on him, emotionally and physically. He always wanted her, but now, the drive was stronger than ever. Waiting for the ball to be over would be an eternity. Not that everyone would wait. Across the room, he was amused to see the Marquess of Dunbury and his wife slipping into the shadows to the hall, seeking a place to find private delights.

Which gave him an idea...

END

### *Josie*

Considering all the revelations since her wedding, Josie was no longer surprised when she felt nothing but happiness for Joseph as she watched him waltzing in celebration of his engagement to Miss Bliss. She did not feel horror about the man she loved marrying

another woman because the man she loved was at her side, smiling with pride at his younger brother.

She truly was happy for Miss Bliss. The debutante's name had been paired with multiple eligible gentlemen, yet none of them had offered for her. She deserved happiness. If she was a bit boring, well, that was for Joseph to live with.

"My lady, may I have this dance?" Elijah asked, turning and giving her a slight bow as the music for Joseph and Miss Bliss' waltz came to an end. Josie's smile was brilliant.

"Yes, my lord." Her tone was light and flirtatious, and Elijah grinned in response. She wondered if he realized how much he was lightening up in recent days, no longer always so serious. A smile looked good on him. His dark hair waved away from his face, the points of his collar were stiffly starched, the white fabric contrasting sharply with his hair and eyes, and his blue waistcoat complemented her dress beautifully. They were an attractive pairing, and she heard several murmurs of appreciation from the audience as they took to the floor.

The country dance was faster-paced than the waltz but allowed Elijah to hold her in his arms, and Josie felt her heart fluttering madly as he whirled her around the dance floor along with the other couples. She could see Rex and Mary doing the same, and to her amusement, Lily was dancing stiffly with Captain Jones, both of them eying the other warily. She wondered what Lily had said to him to garner that response, but knowing Lily, it was something blunt, acerbic, or both.

Well, maybe having the opportunity to talk to him herself would keep Lily from pestering Josie with more questions about him because Josie truly did not know. Elijah was mostly forthcoming with answers, but since he was not willing to entertain suspicions of his friend, he could only be pushed so far, and Josie did not blame him.

"Josie..." Elijah started to say something, then cut off, drawing her attention up to him. He looked oddly pensive, almost hesitant,

not his normal self.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“I was wondering...” His voice trailed off again, and Josie seriously considered trodding on his foot to spur him to actually finish a sentence.

“Yes, Elijah?”

Instead of answering, he lifted his head, looking about, then pulled her off of the dance floor. What on earth? She did not protest, gamely following him, wondering where he was leading her. They only received a few glances as they moved along, most of the guests assuming they had some duties to attend to behind the scenes. Josie knew everything was well in hand, though. Mrs. Brandon would have come and found her otherwise.

Bemused, she followed Elijah into the hall to the drawing room. No sooner had he locked the door behind him than he was pulling her into his arms, his lips descending on hers. She gasped in delighted shock, and his tongue slid between her lips when they parted. This was not at all what she had been expecting. The kiss deepened, lengthened, and he moved her backward, trapping her between his body and the wall next to the door.

“Elijah!” Her whisper was scandalized as he pulled his lips away from hers, moving them down her neck. “Here?!” It was not a protest, more a shocked question. She was so surprised Elijah, of all people, would sneak away, especially during his brother’s engagement ball, for a private interlude. The surprise and excitement stirred her arousal, especially knowing their guests were only a few doors away. It was scandalous, was what it was, and exhilarating.

“Yes.” His hands cupped her breasts and squeezed as his hardness pressed against her, parting her legs. “Here.” She gasped as he tweaked her nipples through the fabric of her dress, then dropped his hands away, pulling at her skirts. “Now.”

“You’ll wrinkle my skirts!” The thought was nonsensical, yet she could not fathom returning to the ball with wrinkled skirts,



where everyone would be able to see... everyone would *know*... Her cheeks turned bright red at the mere thought.

With a low curse, he spun her around. Josie pressed her forearms against the wall, bracing herself, slightly bent forward in this position.

“Like this then?” It was a rhetorical question as he flipped her skirts above her hips and parted the slit in her drawers. His hand caressed her buttocks before giving her a little swat that made her gasp again, then his fingers curved around her hips, pulling them back and bending her forward a little more.

She did not know when he had time to undo the front of his breeches, but his cock thrust into her from behind, hard enough she bit her lip as the sweet sensation of being filled so hard and fast rippled through her. The noise from the ballroom was muted, hardly enough to drown out her cries if anyone was in the hall.

Elijah’s body slapped against her buttocks each time he filled her, driving her need higher but not quite enough sensation in the right spots to give her satisfaction.

“Please... Elijah...” she whispered, squirming back against him. “I need more.”

“Then beg me, minx,” he whispered, the brush of his lips against the shell of her ear sending a shiver through her.

“Please, Elijah, please, touch me...” It was harder to keep her voice low, but she managed it, too wound up to care she was begging. It aroused her even more, though she did not think she would ever admit it aloud.

“Like this?” His hands caressed her hips, her bottom, and she ground her teeth in frustration, bucking against him.

“No, Elijah...”

“Then tell me where, sweetheart.” The wicked note in his voice made it clear he knew exactly what she wanted—needed—but he was going to make her declare it. If he thought she had any shame left, he was about to discover he was wrong.

“My pussy, Elijah, please, touch my pussy.”

Her pleas were rewarded. Reaching around her, his fingers pressed into her cleft, finding the little pearl of pleasure between her slick folds and stroking it. Josie moaned, then clapped her hand over her mouth. The frantic need to keep quiet, the notion someone might try to enter the room while Elijah was riding her so furiously from behind, was wildly exciting her.

Her pleasure circled higher and higher with each stroke of his fingers until she cried out, shuddering around him, and felt him surge. He pinched her clit, adding a jolt of pain to her pleasure and making her legs shake even more, leaving them both panting for breath. Inside her, she felt him throb with every wave of his own climax, his hips only making the smallest of movements.

Despite the quickness of the encounter, it had been utterly satisfying. Josie wondered at her excitement from it all evening. The night at the Society, she had felt similarly when anyone might have walked in and seen them. Why had it had aroused her? Was it possible she actually wanted to be watched?

No... the very idea made her shudder, but the thought someone might catch them was different somehow. Possibly the secrecy added to the intimacy.

Whatever the reason, the rest of the evening, she felt even more connected to Elijah, and when they tumbled into bed that evening, their lovemaking was passionate.

Elijah

*My Lord,*

*I urge you to visit the Tramp's Den with me this evening. I have received word our elusive Frenchman will be there. I will be there at half-past midnight.*

*~Mitchell*

Anticipation and excitement rose in Elijah's chest. Finally, after days of frustration and a lack of leads, he may be able to find the Frenchman who had set Josie up. Not that he regretted the events as they happened—he did not think he would be married to Josie otherwise, and his life would be the sadder for it—but if the villain had succeeded, it would have caused great unhappiness for his family and him personally. Not only that, they could not rely on the traitor's future machinations to have such happy endings.

The *ton's* entertainments would still be in full swing at half-past but would have gone on long enough, no one would think it amiss if he stepped away.

"What is that?"

Elijah's first instinct was to hide the letter from Josie, but he did no more than twitch when he heard her voice. He did not mean to keep things from her anymore, not after he had promised to keep her informed.

Lifting his head, hiding his reaction, he smiled when he saw her standing in the hall with his father, both of them looking at him curiously.

“Exciting news?” his father asked amiably, though his eyes were alight with sharp curiosity, knowing no invitation or social note would cause Elijah such elation.

“Mitchell believes the Frenchman will be at the Tramp’s Den tonight,” Elijah said simply, striding forward to pass the note to his father. Josie leaned in to look, and Elijah saw his father hesitate for a moment before tilting the paper to accommodate her. Including Josie would take some getting used to, but if it kept her happy and from following Evie’s example, it would be worth it.

His father straightened, a grin spreading across his face, just like Elijah. They had both been in the game long enough to have a sense for when there was going to be a break in the case, and this was it. Elijah knew it. It did not hurt to see his father had the same presentiment.

“What is the Tramp’s Den?” Josie’s confusion made Elijah wince. She, of course, did not possess the same intuition, nor did she have any knowledge of the Tramp’s Den. Discussions about gaming hells were not for ladies’ ears, but he had promised to keep her informed.

“It’s a gaming hell in one of the worst parts of London.”

A little scowl furrowed her brow, and she looked up at him, opening her mouth to say something before glancing to the side at his father and dropping her head. Elijah realized she had almost revealed how his last trip through the streets of London had gone, then remembered he was keeping that particular incident from his father. She was keeping his secrets, even from his father, proving she could be trusted. A happy warmth spread through his chest.

They truly were a partnership.

“Well, you cannot go alone.” Josie’s scowl deepened, her lips pursing together.

He knew keeping of his secret would only go so far if she felt he

was in danger, and though it was frustrating, that warmed him in a different manner.

“I will not be alone. I will meet Mitchell there.” This time he would also be more on guard instead of lost in his own thoughts. “I will be careful.”

“I should come with you.”

“Absolutely not,” he and his father said in unison, horrified by the very idea. They exchanged a quick glance, and Father grasped Josie’s arm.

“The Warrens are no place for a woman unless she’s... well, suffice to say, the only women there are the ones...” Father floundered to find a genteel way to tell Josie the only women in the Warrens were lightskirts and not the best quality of those. Since Elijah did not have any suggestions and was perfectly happy to let Father explain to Josie why she could not join him, he kept his mouth firmly shut.

Josie rolled her eyes at both of them. “The whores? I am not entirely naïve, you know.”

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Josie

Men... always thinking they knew better than everyone. She enjoyed seeing their expressions when they realized she knew exactly what Elijah’s father was referring to.

She would spare both of them the knowledge it had been Evie who had educated Josie and the others about the occupations available to women who had fallen on hard times and did not have the skills or opportunity to find other avenues of work. There were not many opportunities at all for women, especially women on their own. Evie had explained the different levels of selling oneself, from the mistress of a wealthy man all the way down to the three-penny-uprights.

Josie knew about the Warrens and gaming hells. She might not

have heard of the Tramp's Den, but it was hardly the only gaming hell located there.

Uncle Oliver coughed.

"Yes, well, it is no place for a lady and not at all safe. Elijah will be far safer without your presence since he would have to protect you."

"I am not sure an armed guard could protect a lady like her traveling through the Warrens," Elijah muttered.

"A lady like me?" Ready to be indignant over the perceived insult, her feathers were soothed by his answer.

"A beautiful, wealthy one."

Hmphing, Josie subsided, looking between father and son. They were two peas in a pod, nearly identical in their expressions and looks. It was a little disconcerting if she was truthful, but Josie would not wither under their combined censure. She was made of sterner stuff.

However, she also recognized when to make a retreat.

For all Elijah's talk about including her and treating her as his partner, it was clear he had only meant in a very limited sense.

"Very well." Her waspish tone did not need any pretense to achieve. While she fully planned to work around their dictates, she was still peeved what she thought she and Elijah had agreed to was clearly not what *he* thought they had agreed to. "I shall expect your report later."

The glance the two men exchanged before she whirled away and stomped upstairs did nothing to cool her temper. Wisely, Elijah did not follow her. She would have sent him away with a scathing retort, no matter how good his apology was.

She needed time to think and plan, to also find the only pair of breeches she'd brought to London. Although she had known she could not use them to ride in the city, she had still brought them, unable to imagine being without at least one set.

A good thing. She was going to need them tonight.

While she should avoid the Warrens as herself, there was

nothing to say she could not venture there in disguise. Going as any kind of woman seemed far too dangerous for her liking, but there was another option.

Making another hmph, she shook her head. Men. Sometimes they had so little imagination.

Her bottom cheeks seemed to tingle as if in warning of punishments to come, but there were some things that were worth a little pain.

Elijah

Despite Josie's anger at being left out, in the end, Elijah knew she would see this had been for the best. Hopefully, she would also be mollified by his full report when he returned. Why she had expected to be allowed to go into such a dangerous area with him, he did not know, but he expected it was a result of her worry over the injuries he had received the last time. When he returned unharmed, she would feel less anxious in the future.

She made things easier on him, claiming a megrim and canceling their plans for the evening. Now he did not have to slip away from the guests, leaving her behind. Everyone would assume they had decided to stay in together. It might cause gossip about whether they had become a love match, especially since there were already those who thought so, but that was hardly detrimental.

They were not wrong, though Elijah hoped the traitor still thought they were.

At midnight, Elijah left the house, his cane firmly gripped in his hand. He would hardly be the only tonnish gentleman making his way to the gaming hells in the Warrens, and it was early enough in the night, no one would think even a single gentleman was a good mark. Leaving was the greater danger when the ruffians would assume him tired, drunk, and distracted. The last time he had been two out of three. Still, he kept a weather eye out as he moved

through the streets, feigning looking around lazily when, in fact, he was sharply aware of everything going on around him.

Which was why he quickly realized he was being tailed as he grew closer to the Warrens.

He wasn't sure when he picked up the follower. All the streets, respectable and otherwise, were fairly crowded at this time of night, but he was still sure he was being followed. His pursuer was not good at hiding his movements, and Elijah caught more than one glimpse out of the corner of his eye. It might not have amounted to much, except the lad was clearly focused on Elijah rather than following the same path.

A few more turns and glimpses had Elijah more and more confused, wondering if the lad was a distraction from the real threat. Or just watching to see where Elijah was going? The flashes he saw gave him the impression of a slender youth, inept at following and certainly no real threat.

It was not until he glimpsed a blonde curl, peeking from beneath the lad's cap, that Elijah realized he might not be a lad at all.

Shock.

Denial.

Fury.

The emotions assailed him, battering him like blows to his stomach and chest.

She would not.

The thought had no sooner flickered through his mind than another followed it, acknowledging reality rather than trying to reject it.

She would.

Just as when the letter from Mitchell had arrived, Elijah knew it deep in his gut, it was no lad trailing behind him through the Warrens—it was his wife.

Josie

Breathless, Josie grumbled under her breath as Elijah suddenly picked up his pace, turning a corner. She had to hurry to keep up with him.

Following someone was much harder than she had imagined, even in her comfortable breeches, where she did not have to worry about her skirts tangling or getting caught on anything. She thought Elijah might have glimpsed her once or twice, and she could only hope he did not realize she was following him. From the way he moved, his head turning this way and that, she knew he was keeping his promise to keep an eye out for any hint of danger.

The smells of the streets had grown worse as they'd moved along, the people on them rougher. Josie had taken the time to dirty her appearance and her clothing as she moved along, noting her surroundings and the people she was passing, and no one gave her a second glance. Most of them were too busy minding their own business. Their gazes skipped over her as being unremarkable and unthreatening, just the way she wanted it.

Now, she drew a few unwelcome glances as she picked up her pace, people curious why she was rushing. Elijah had turned the corner so quickly, she was worried he was close to his destination, and she did not want to miss it. There were few signs or indications of what was in each of the buildings she passed. Some were small, some huge, and everyone knew where they were going... except her.

Blasted Elijah knew where he was going, and the last thing she needed was him disappearing into some building and having no idea which one. She did not know if she could find her way back to more respectable streets without following him back.

Cursing under her breath, she rounded the corner at a near run and slammed into something both soft and hard. Hands gripped her arms, keeping her from falling over, and her head jerked upwards to stare into the dark, menacing eyes of her extremely

displeased husband.

“Oops,” Josie said.

Elijah

Oops? *Oops?*!

He was going to throttle her. Of all the hare-brained, ninny-headed, batty-fang, daft—

“My lord?” Mitchell’s smooth tones interrupted Elijah’s glaring, making both him and Josie jerk their heads up at the interruption. He felt Josie sag slightly in his grip—in relief? Ha. If she thought Mitchell’s interruption would save her later...

Mitchell was perturbed, not surprising since he likely did not recognize Josie. Despite his protective rage, Elijah’s brain was working enough to admit Josie had done a passable job with her disguise. Other than the blonde curl peeking out from under her cap, her hair was completely hidden, her face, clothes, and hands appeared grimy, and the bagginess of her shirt hid her curves completely.

Which was why it had taken *him* so long to realize she was not what she seemed.

“Do you need me to take care of... this?” The disdain in Mitchell’s voice as he eyed Josie made Elijah realize Mitchell not only thought Josie was a lad but was a threat that needed to be dealt with.

Moving her away from Mitchell and partially behind him, he

glared at the other man.

“This is my *wife*.” The words came out on an unhappy growl, and Mitchell’s eyes widened, taking a step back. As usual, he was dressed to the nines. Though his sartorial splendor could not reach that of Elijah’s, he still looked every inch the proper gentleman. It occurred to Elijah someone who was so meticulous about always appearing his best would not imagine a lady of the *ton* might dress up as a boy and dirty herself in disguise. So, he did not feel as bad about his own blind spots.

“Your *wife*?” Mitchell’s tone was incredulous as he tried to peer around him, and Elijah could not entirely blame him. He had insisted on seeing Josie as a flibbertigibbet debutante, even when Elijah and Joseph had tried to correct that impression. “What on earth...?”

That was Elijah’s question as well, but he did not like to hear it repeated by Mitchell. It was not Mitchell’s place to question Josie’s actions.

“You will have to excuse me, Mitchell. I need to take my wife home.”

“No!” Mitchell and Josie spoke in unison, both just as vehement.

“My lord, you might miss this opportunity to find the Frenchman if you do,” Mitchell said, frustration coloring his words, but no more than Josie’s did.

“Absolutely not, Elijah. If you think I will not follow you right back out again, you are wrong.”

Casting his eyes heavenward, Elijah gritted his teeth and sent a desperate appeal to the Almighty for patience. He loosened his hold on Josie, his hand itching to turn her over his knee, but this was not the time nor the place. Eventually, her bottom would pay a heavy price for her recklessness.

When he straightened his neck, Josie was glaring at him, and Mitchell was glaring at Josie. Which made Elijah want to punch Mitchell in the face, even if he had the right of it. Shaking his

head, he looked around as if seeking inspiration for his next action from the streets around them.

There were a few passersby, but the shadows were deep. He could not send Josie back the way she came on her own. Even with the dirt, she made too pretty a lad, and someone was bound to notice. At this time of night, there would be those looking for entertainment.

“Go inside and look for the Frenchman,” Elijah ordered Mitchell. He could not think when he was distracted by the other man’s disapproval of Josie.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Josie glared back at him, not watching as Mitchell walked to the next building down and entered, shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

“What the devil were you thinking?” Elijah wished he had not let go of her arm. He would have shaken her if he was still holding onto her, but she was standing far enough away, she would easily elude him if he reached for her again. The desire to drag her home, tie her to the bed, and spank her bottom red, then leave her there to think about her actions until he could return to deal with her was strong, but Mitchell was right. Elijah did not want to miss his opportunity to find the Frenchman. That left only one option, but he did not want to do that, either. “Do you have any idea how dangerous following me was?”

“Of course, I do,” Josie scoffed. “That is why I brought this.” Reaching into the short coat she was wearing, into a pouch tucked between her arm and her side, she pulled out a pistol. It was dark enough, Elijah could not see exactly what kind, but he made a strangled noise in his throat.

Elijah was not the only one who had seen the gun. Movement along the side of the street caught his eye—someone stepping back into an alley when they caught sight of Josie’s gun. He did not blame them. He wanted to flee as well, even though she was holding it safely, with the barrel pointed to the ground.

“Do you even know how to use that?” he demanded, squashing

the urge to reach out and grab it, which might be just dangerous if she did not.

Josie scowled at him.

“I will have you know I am a crack shot.” Josie sniffed. “You can ask your brothers. Unlike you, they were not too stuffy to teach mere girls to shoot.”

“What if someone had come up behind you and surprised you? You had it tucked away in a pouch. What if they had come at you so quickly from the front, you did not have the time to draw it? What if it misfired? What if you were vastly outnumbered?” Elijah glared, firing off the questions rapidly. “Did you consider any of that? Or did you think having a weapon made you invincible?”

Josie

Barraged by an attack of logic rather than emotion, Josie was taken aback. She had been ready for Elijah’s fury, his shock and outrage, but not questions. There were several factors she had not considered.

But...

“Why would anyone do any of those things?” she demanded. “I am just a boy on the streets. I brought this to protect you, not me.” The nincompoop.

“These streets can be as dangerous for boys as they are for women, especially pretty boys like you.” Elijah took a step closer.

Even in the dim lighting from the moon, which barely trickled down into the dark streets, she could see his eyes flash as they traveled over her shape, the same way they did when she was wearing a revealing gown. Josie’s breath hitched.

“The Society of Sin is not the only place where men prefer the company of other men, but only those who want to be part of the Society are there. Elsewhere, young men and boys meet the same fate as women, and you make a very pretty boy.”

Josie's jaw dropped in shock, and she blanched when she realized how deadly serious he was. She had thought dressed as she was would protect her. She did not appear prosperous or a likely prospect for thieves and pickpockets, but she had not considered someone might want something... else. Some of the fleeting glances others had cast upon her as she made her way through the streets ran back through her head, seen from a different lens.

When Elijah put it that way, her behavior had been more foolhardy than she had considered. Evie had mentioned none of that. Then again, Josie was sure there was a wealth of knowledge Evie had not had the time or inclination to pass on to her friends. Evie would have focused on what she felt they needed to know, not the things she did not think would affect them. She had never imagined Josie dressing as a boy to sneak through the worst parts of London in the middle of the night.

"Well, I made it here safely enough. Just like you when you wandered about *alone*. *Unlike* you, *I* have received no specific threats against my life." So there. Her chin jutted out stubbornly, and Elijah glared even harder.

"You were lucky. What was your plan if I was attacked? You might have accidentally shot me, especially if I was ambushed."

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a pair of brass knuckles, and Elijah groaned.

"Now you're a boxer, too?"

"Lily is the best boxer, but I am not terrible," Josie replied stiffly. Her husband stared at her, completely dumbfounded.

"*Lily*? Sweet, quiet, buried-in-her-books Lily is the boxer?" Disbelief dripped from his voice.

"She is the strongest of us, probably from carrying all those books she likes to read." Josie preferred shooting things, whether with a bow or a gun, whereas Lily had excelled at fencing and boxing. "Did Joseph never tell you about the time Lily gave him a bloody nose?" Going by Elijah's expression, Joseph clearly had not,

and Josie shook her head. That was what Elijah had missed by being several years older than the rest of them. She almost felt sorry for him. "You are always underestimating us." No wonder he was so hot under his collar about their safety. He had no idea of their abilities.

Mary was the only one who had avoided Evie and the Stuart boys' lessons, though sometimes, she had read in the corner while they were going on.

"My lord." Mitchell's voice interrupted them, filled with excitement. Elijah whirled around, and Josie moved to the side, so she could see the other man. The hat on Mitchell's head kept his face shadowed, but she could still tell he was excited. "He's here."

Her own excitement leapt. Elijah would never leave now, which would give him no choice but to let her stay. Unless he tried to send her back home with Mitchell, in which case she would remind him that he had warned her to stay away from the man.

She knew she was going to have a pair of seriously sore buttocks, but that only made her more determined to see this through. If she was going to have to pay the piper, she wanted the prize.

Elijah closed his eyes, screwing up his expression, and she nearly cackled with glee. It was happening. Quickly smoothing out her expression before he opened his eyes again, she did her best to appear somber when their gazes met.

"You will stay right by my side." He growled the words as a command. "You will not stray. You will not speak. You will do exactly as I say. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She was far too elated to argue, though her quick agreement only seemed to make him even more growly.

He grasped her by the upper arm, just above her elbow, turning to face Mitchell, who was waiting for them.

The man gaped. "You're bringing her in here? Send her home!"

"Shut up, Mitchell. It is not your place to tell me what to do."

Josie refrained from sticking her tongue out at the man, but

barely. Really? Send her home through the streets of London on her own? It was one thing for her to risk herself, but he clearly did not care what terrible fate might befall her. He was a cad, and she did not trust him farther than she could throw him, no matter what Elijah and Uncle Oliver said.

Her suspicion and dislike of Mitchell were quickly drowned out when the door opened, and she took her first steps into a gaming hell.

Josie

Beyond the first door into the Tramp's Den was not impressive, leading into a hall, dimly lit and completely undecorated. The door shut behind them, leaving them in the tiny, enclosed space, making her feel quite claustrophobic. The dark wood walls seemed ready to close in around them. A wood door was in front of them, muffling the sounds coming from within.

Mitchell stepped forward to rap on the door, and it swung open with a burst of sound, making Josie jump. It was a thick door. She had not realized how loud it would be on the other side. Her heart, already beating fast, pounded.

A massive mountain of a man stood in the doorway, eyeing them, his eyes lingering on her. The change in his expression was imperceptible, but she felt sure he realized she was no youth. After a moment, he stepped back, giving Elijah a nod, and Josie suspected if she had been on her own, she would not have been allowed entry.

Mitchell and Elijah seemed perfectly at home walking into the hell, Elijah's fingers still firmly gripped around her arm. Josie stood out like a sore thumb amid the rowdy patrons, all gentlemen or nobility. Even those in various states of dishevelment were better clothed and not as dirty. Despite that, no one glanced twice

at her, far more interested in their own doings.

There were some men she recognized from the ballrooms of London. The atmosphere was rowdy, and most of them were already deep in their cups, oblivious to anything but their bets.

The room was far more lushly decorated than she would have guessed from the entrance, with deep reds and golds, though the actual fabrics were cheaper and tawdrier than those found in more respectable establishments. Josie's eyes darted back and forth, taking in everything.

Finally, she looked up at the high ceiling and saw a man standing on a balcony, looking down over the crowd like a king surveying his subjects. He must be the owner of the place. Standing next to him was a young woman, with her long hair down and covering her breasts... but nothing else was. She looked like Lady Godiva, naked but for her hair and a collar around her neck. Josie stared until she almost stumbled over her feet. Elijah moved her along, and she was not watching where she was going.

"That's the Tramp and his lady," Elijah said into her ear, not bothering to whisper. She would not have heard him, anyway but needed to be close so she could make out his words over the din. "He keeps her on a collar and leash, naked, with a tail plugged into her bottom, and occasionally parades her through the hell. I might take some notes on how to make a woman behave if you keep up your antics, minx."

Josie gulped, flashing hot, then cold, then hot again. Her body did not know what to make of his threat. She was both aroused and fearful... Surely, he would not... but given everything she had seen at the Society, such a punishment would hardly be exceptional if he were to do it there.

A shiver went down her spine, and her buttocks clenched together.

A tail?

Her eyes drifted back up to the young woman who was now tucked under the Tramp's arm as he leaned his head down to

whisper something in her ear.

“This way,” Mitchell said loudly, dragging Josie’s attention back to the matter at hand. She shook her head. The Tramp and his lady were nothing but a distraction, albeit an extremely interesting one, and she needed to focus. “I secured us a private room. He is waiting there.”

Excitement slid through her, of an entirely different quality than the kind Elijah had stirred within her.

Elijah

Though he wished he could stash Josie in a private room for safekeeping and meet the Frenchman elsewhere, Elijah appreciated Mitchell’s forethought and followed him into the room. A man was lounging in one of the chairs arranged around a small gaming table. The room was used for private games of cards, often with higher stakes and no audience. It was more richly furnished than the main room and only available upon request. The man looked up when Mitchell came in, appearing bored, and when he spoke, it was with a distinct French accent. He was no lord. The cut of his clothing spoke of a well-to-do middle-class gentleman, possibly someone who might be invited to a ton event if he was prosperous and well-connected.

“Took you long enough.” He blew a puff of smoke from the cigarette between his fingers and eyed Elijah as he stepped around Mitchell. “This is the gentleman you wanted me to speak to?”

“I am the Earl of Durham,” Elijah said coldly before Mitchell could respond. Surprise flashed across the man’s face, which was interesting. Apparently, Mitchell had not revealed his identity, and the man had not known it. Elijah did not think even the best actor could pull off such disbelief at the moment. “And you are?”

“You may call me Jacques. And who is this?” the Frenchman asked, transferring his gaze to Josie, his brow furrowing.

Thankfully, Josie kept quiet, as Elijah had told her to.

“None of your concern,” Elijah said smoothly, letting go of her arm since she seemed willing to behave. Reaching into his coat, he pulled out a small purse and tossed it onto the table in front of the Frenchman. “I have a few questions to ask you.”

The man eyed the pouch and waved his hand.

“I have no need of your money. Ask.”

“Did you come over from France with the delegation this Season?”

“*Oui*.” The man nodded his head. “Obviously, I am not part of the delegation. We happened to be on the same ship. I live in England now and have for many years.”

Interesting.

“Did you attend a *ton* event a few weeks ago where you delivered a note to a young lady?”

Jacques’ features flickered for a mere moment.

“*Non*, I do not go to such events.”

“Liar!” Josie’s fury was palpable as she jumped forward. Cursing inwardly, Elijah grabbed her arm again, but it was too late. The cap tumbled from her head, revealing her golden curls, and the Frenchman’s jaw dropped open, too stunned to pretend he did not recognize her. “I remember you!”

“Bloody hell, Josie!” If he had wanted to shake her before, it was nothing compared to how he felt now.

“Can you not keep your wife under control?” Mitchell shouted at Elijah.

“Get out of here,” Elijah snarled, glaring at him. “I will call you in if I need you.” Mitchell opened his mouth to protest, but Elijah shouted. “*Out!*”

He could not deal with Josie, Mitchell, and Jacques at the same time, and the only one he could remove from the situation was Mitchell. Utterly furious, Mitchell bowed jerkily and stomped out of the room, muttering imprecations under his breath and slamming the door behind him.

Jacques said something in a stream of French, too fast for Elijah's brain to catch. He had never been proficient in the language, outside of the general terms the *ton* used, commonly called 'drawing-room French.' He was far from being fluent, and Jacques was talking quickly.

The look he gave Elijah was almost condemning.

"What did you bring her here for?" He seemed almost horrified.

"I am here to see you! Do you know what happened after you gave me that note? It summoned me to the garden where a man tried to rape me!" Josie, spitting mad, practically launched herself at Jacques, who recoiled, his hand on his heart. His expression was truly horrified now.

"I did not know!" he protested. "I would *never* harm a lady. I was told to deliver the note to you. I had no idea what was inside."

Elijah got the distinct impression this was not at all how Jacques had seen this conversation going, and he certainly had not meant to confess to his part in everything—or held out longer without being directly confronted by Josie. So as much as it went against Elijah's grain, he let Josie keep talking. His job now was to stop her from actually attacking Jacques, who seemed far more intimidated by her than Elijah. Galling, but the truth, and he was willing to use what worked.

"And you think that means you are not culpable? Who sent you? Who gave you the note?"

Josie

Venting her fury on a worthy party felt far too good, especially with Elijah's broad shoulders and muscles to back her up. Jacques seemed chattier with her than he had with Elijah. His eyes skittered away from hers, and she got the sense he never expected to come face to face with someone he had wronged, especially not a woman and not in a place such as this. The surprise must have

thrown him off balance.

“A Russian.” The moment he said the words, Jacques’ mouth snapped shut, a look of consternation flowing over his features. He had not meant to say that. In fact, he looked nervous, his eyes darting back and forth between them. “You must tell no one I told you that.”

“Why not?” This time it was Elijah who asked the question.

“I was threatened not to reveal that... If anyone was to come calling, I was supposed to say an English lord,” Jacques confessed, his face slowly paling. “My life was threatened. You must not tell anyone, please.”

“What was the Russian’s name?” Josie narrowed her eyes at him. While she believed he was telling the truth, she was not too sure she cared about whatever consequences befell Jacques. He might not have meant her harm, but he had been the cause of it, anyway.

“I do not know.” Jacques shook his head, sitting up straighter. “You must believe me. I had never seen him before. I lost a large wager here and owed him a favor, which I fulfilled by delivering the note. I have not seen him again.”

“Describe him to me,” Elijah commanded.

Not long after, they exited the room, leaving behind a sweaty and pale-faced Jacques. There had not been much more to learn from him—a dark-haired Russian man of average height and weight could have described any of the current delegation or any other number of Russian gentlemen in London.

Practically dragging her back through the crowded room of the gaming hell and out onto the street, Mitchell trotting along behind them, Elijah appeared deep in thought.

“My lord? My lord? What did he say?” Mitchell dogged Elijah’s footsteps, almost stepping on them to get Elijah’s attention. Josie scowled at him. She supposed she should be grateful since they would not have known Jacques’ whereabouts without Mitchell, but she did not like his demanding tone. Her dislike of him as a person

was coloring her feelings.

“He said a Russian hired him.” Elijah shook his head, frowning.

Mitchell came to an abrupt halt, and Josie glanced over her shoulder to see him standing there looking struck. He rushed forward again, quickly catching up to them because, of course, Elijah had not stopped moving. He seemed to want to get out of the Warrens as soon as possible. Josie was torn. She had no desire to stay in the Warrens any longer, but she was also not looking forward to when Elijah got her to the privacy of their home.

“A Russian?” Mitchell’s voice was oddly strangled. “But... my lord, are you certain he was telling the truth? Everything seems to point to the French...”

“Everything except this, but I cannot talk about it with you now, Mitchell. I have other matters to deal with.” Elijah’s tone was grim, and his fingers did not tighten, yet Josie felt his grip far more keenly. Her heart was beating fast for an entirely different reason, and her mouth had gone dry.

Suddenly, accepting the consequences of her actions as long as she got to be a part of the action no longer seemed quite so fair a trade.

“Of course... I will... I will see what I can discover about the Russians.” There was something odd in Mitchell’s tone, but Elijah did not appear to notice as they finally reached a street with a hackney. Elijah hailed the jarvey, who pulled the carriage up in front of them with a curious look at Josie, though he said nothing when Elijah pushed her into the carriage in front of him.

Sitting on the bench, Josie crossed her arms over her chest, blowing out a long breath, while Elijah gave the jarvey their direction. She did not have long to get comfortable. Elijah got into the carriage, sitting on the bench, and before she could even attempt to apologize or plead her case, he had her tipped over his lap as the carriage lurched into motion.

Josie

Stifling a shriek, Josie bucked against the first application of Elijah's hard hand to her backside. She had thought he would wait until they were back at Stuart House before beginning her punishment!

"Elijah! Not here!" She reached back to cover her bottom and give it some protection, but he quickly grasped her wrists and pinned them to the small of her back.

"Yes, here." His tone was as grim as it had been outside the carriage, and he punctuated each sentence with a short, sharp slap on her bottom that made her bite her lip against shrieking. "If you can go gallivanting at night, out in the open, putting yourself in danger, then you can be punished here as well. You should be glad I waited 'til we were in here to punish you."

"The coachman! He'll hear!" She did not manage to stifle her cry as his hand came down on a spot he had already spanked. The fabric of her breeches did even less than her skirts to shield her bottom from his hard swats. Few times, she felt her skirts had an advantage over breeches, but this was one of them.

"He will hardly care."

Elijah did not care if he heard as he rained down swats in earnest on her bottom. Josie did her best not to cry out, wishing

she had not tried to cover her cheeks when he first spanked her. At least then, she could have used her hands to quiet herself, but now all she could do was bury her face against the thin cushion on the bench as her tears poured into it.

The wet fabric rubbed against her cheeks, annoying but hardly a distraction from the painful heat growing in her rear. Her legs kicked, but Elijah easily hooked his own leg around them, pinning her even more in place and leaving her entirely helpless to his stern discipline.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

“Elijah! Please! I am sorry!”

How many swats did he mean to give her? It seemed unending, and he did not slow down even a little, no matter how the carriage turned and jostled them or how she bucked on his lap. The stinging fire across her skin was growing exponentially, turning into a raging inferno, and they were not even home yet!

Elijah

“Are you sorry, Josie? Or are you only sorry you were caught?” The question grated out between his teeth.

His temper was tightly reined—he would never punish her in anger—but that did not stop him from giving her exactly what he thought she was due. And when they arrived home... Oh, yes, his little minx’s punishment had hardly begun.

Elijah realized he had been holding back with Josie. She had never been given the true measure of what he was capable of when it came to disciplining her. Part of him had been worried about turning her against him, about her continuing to prefer his brother over him, and that leniency had led to this.

No more. He did not know if she loved him, but he loved her and would not tolerate her putting herself in danger. As angry as he had been, deep down, she had frightened him. Thinking about

all the things that could have happened to her was utterly paralyzing. Elijah did not know what he would have done if anything had happened to her. He would have been devastated.

“I am sorry!” There was more defiance in her voice than anything. Elijah did not hear any true repentance, but they would get there. Another sharp swat to her bottom had her squealing and squirming again.

The spanking was hurting his hand. As soon as they got home, he would use far more interesting ways to punish her so she would not forget it. The breeches she was wearing were already giving him all sorts of ideas. His cock rose, swelling against her soft, wiggling curves.

“You do not sound particularly sorry.” He brought his hand down, moving back and forth between each hot cheek. Even through the fabric of her breeches, he could feel her skin was getting hot, and he intended to make her cheeks glow. “Perhaps you should work on your sincerity.”

“Perhaps you should work on not being such a hypocrite,” she shot back. “I was only doing the same thing you were!”

“The hell you were,” Elijah scoffed with another swat to her bottom. “I was going to a destination I was well acquainted with and would have had an escort back. *You* were following me through streets you do not know at all, would not have been allowed into the Den without my presence, and exactly how were you planning on getting back home?”

Her position changed slightly, slumping, and Elijah felt as if he might have finally gotten through to her. Yes, he admired her bravery, but he was determined to curb her impulsiveness.

“You left me no choice!” She bucked on his lap, sniffing. “You were going to leave me at home after telling me we were partners.” There was a sadness in her tone that had not been there before, and Elijah softened. His hand was beginning to hurt, anyway. The rest of her punishment could wait until they were home.

Hauling her onto his lap, he felt her surprise when he cuddled her in close. She snuggled in easily enough, though she squirmed a bit on his lap, trying to find a comfortable position on the bottom he had just chastised. He could feel the heat emanating from her across his thighs and cock.

“We are partners. That does not mean you can merrily go your way into danger. I would have come home and told you everything without you having to risk yourself.”

“You might not have known everything without me,” Josie scoffed. “The only reason he told the truth so willingly was I surprised him.”

There was enough truth, Elijah hesitated, but only for a moment.

“It was not worth putting yourself in that kind of danger.” He would hold to that. There was no information, no piece of knowledge worth her life.

“Then next time, take me with you, and you will not have to worry about it.”

“Next time, I might get my father to watch you, so I do not have to worry about you,” he threatened.

“Then I will tell your father about you coming home after being attacked because you were out wandering without your guard.”

“If you think that will stop me from protecting you, you are very wrong.”

Josie

The realization Elijah was willing to face his father’s disapproval and wrath if it meant keeping her safe had even more of an impact than his hand on her bottom. It warmed her from the inside out in an entirely different manner than the spanking. While she disagreed such measures were necessary to keep her safe—after all, she had made it through tonight unscathed—she knew

what a large concession that was from his perspective.

Even as she wanted to rail against his overprotectiveness and determination not to include her, part of her liked feeling small, safe, and protected against his chest.

The coach came to a halt, and Elijah got them out. He'd had the jarvey bring them around to the side entrance of the house. The hour was late, but there would still be lords and ladies arriving home, and if they saw Elijah leading a grubby youth up to the front door... Josie could only imagine the speculation.

Which was why she was surprised when Elijah swung her up into his arms rather than letting her descend from the carriage on her own.

"Elijah!"

"Hush." The command made her bite her tongue.

Why was it sometimes, when he bossed her around, it drove her wild, and when he bossed her around other times, it *really* drove her wild in such a disparate manner? Maybe because her bottom was sore and throbbing, and she did not want to provoke him into punishing her further.

Truthfully, she was a little surprised she had gotten off so lightly. Yes, it had been a long, hard spanking, and she'd been embarrassed, knowing the jarvey probably heard every little shriek and cry, but she had gotten through it well enough.

By the time Elijah carried her up to his room, Josie was feeling warm, aroused, and more than ready for their particular brand of making up. So, she was shocked when Elijah carried her to the corner of the room and set her down, turning her to face the wall.

"What?" She started to turn around, but he put his hands on her shoulders and forcibly turned her back to face the corner.

"You are going to stand here and think about all the things that could have happened to you tonight. When I get back, your true punishment will begin."

Shock, fear, and a shot of pure lust rippled through her, and she squeezed her thighs together. Her true punishment? More than the

spanking? Why did some part of her find that so exciting?

Elijah held her in place for a moment before he was satisfied that she was going to stay there. Then his hands dropped, and she felt him tugging on her pants. A moment later, he pulled the hem of her shirt up.

“Here. You are going to stand with your bottom exposed while you think.”

Red heated her face, probably turning it as bright as her lower cheeks, as she realized the position he meant to leave her in. Incongruently, the pulsing need between her thighs grew hotter. The hem of the shirt was rolled above her waist, held there by her hands, the top of her pants just below the curve of her buttocks, leaving the entirety of her reddened cheeks on display while the rest of her was decently covered. Being naked would have been less embarrassing. This put all the focus on her chastisement, and the cool air wafting across her hot skin would not let her forget why she was standing there.

A little slap to her sensitized skin made her shriek, going up on her toes before she settled back down.

“I will be right back. Do not move.”

Staring at the corner, Josie did not understand why she felt compelled to remain standing there. Should she not argue her case? Tell him to stuff his discipline?

She squirmed uncomfortably, still holding up her shirt to keep her bottom on display.

Except... part of her knew she had earned some punishment. If she was going to argue her case, should she not have done it *before* sneaking out after him? Instead, she had pretended to give in, knowing he would think he had won the argument, so she could do as she pleased.

Had she wanted him to punish her? There had been a touch of disappointment when she thought the spanking in the carriage was the climax of her discipline, and he had given in so easily.

Pressing her lips together, Josie reflected that part of her had

not minded being caught. She had been happy to have his protection rather than following him without his knowledge and had wanted to see what he would do.

That was the least comforting thought of all.

Elijah

Collecting the thickest peeled finger of ginger from the kitchen and some clips and a special oil from his office, Elijah judged he had left Josie alone with her thoughts long enough. If she was smart, she had stayed in position. If not, she would be punished for that as well, but Elijah hoped she had obeyed.

A punishment only worked if the recipient was truly repented. While Elijah was willing to take obedience as an acceptable replacement, he did not like the idea of forcing Josie to his will so much as he wanted her to accept her wrongdoing and not repeat it.

This had been partly his fault, which was why he would go lighter on her than he would for a second transgression. He had known she was upset but assumed she would follow his instruction. He should have expected she would do something audacious. Well, he would be more on guard in the future.

She had a point about her role in Jacques' confession as well.

Something he would also have to think about more when he had the time.

When he opened the door, she jumped, nervously looking over her shoulder, but she was still standing in the corner, reddened bottom on display. The pants she'd worn had somewhat protected her, so her skin was a dark pink rather than a bright red,

attractively framed by the dingy white shirt above and the brown pants above below. The very griminess of her clothing made her skin stand out that much more.

The sight of her standing there, holding her position, sent warmth and hot need coursing through him, assuaging much of his lingering anger. He had no doubt she would make the same choice again, but as long as they both understood doing so would mean accepting the consequences, they could find some kind of better accord between them.

“Good girl.” He infused a bit of warmth into his voice, making sure to reward her for good behavior. It would not ameliorate her punishment, but he believed in the benefits of praise and had seen how Josie responded to it. Now, she relaxed, though the glance she cast over her shoulder was still nervous.

Her appearance was so incongruous. With the cap off of her head, her blonde curls tumbled around her grimy face. In the well-lit room, the dirt she had applied did nothing to hide her beauty, unlike on the streets of the Warren and the dimmer rooms at the Tramp’s Den. Although she had dirt smeared across her pretty face and her clothing, she looked extremely naughty in her boys’ clothes, standing in the corner.

A little smile tugged at Elijah’s lips, but he suppressed it. This was a time to be serious.

“Come here, minx,” he said, coming to a halt beside the bed. Josie turned, nearly stumbling, then realized her issues, but when she reached down to pull her pants up, Elijah halted her. “No. Shuffle over here. Keep your shirt lifted.”

Glaring daggers at him, Josie pressed her lips together but took shuffling steps forward. The golden curls over her mound were now on display, and he enjoyed the sight just as much as he had her punished bottom. His cock was already at full attention and would stay that way for a while since he would not indulge himself soon, either.

Josie

The unique humiliation of not being able to walk properly while holding herself on display was as embarrassing as it was arousing. Elijah's hot gaze stirred her passions, even as she quailed at what he might have planned, wondering how it would hurt. There were no clues to be gleaned from the small tray he had in his hand. The only item she could see clearly was a small bottle, and it was impossible to discern its contents.

Her curiosity boiled up. She desperately wanted a distraction from how awkward she must look. Despite that, Elijah watched her with eyes full of lust, clearly enjoying the sight she made, which bolstered her confidence a bit.

"Bend over." He patted the bed where he wanted her, and Josie felt a moment of relief as she followed his order. Now that she was no longer moving, she did not feel so awkward. A hand cupped her buttocks, making her draw in a quick breath in reaction. Although the skin was sensitized, the touch was not at all painful, and she tingled with anticipation.

"Hm... barely warm. We'll fix that soon enough."

What? Josie groaned. She should have realized he would want to spank her more.

"No, please, Elijah. I said I was sorry!" Silently she acknowledged he had hit the nail on the head when he asked if she was sorrier she had been caught. She still could not regret her actions. She had made a difference tonight, and they both knew it.

"Unfortunately, minx, I do not quite believe you." His hand splayed over her cheeks, parting them, and Josie gasped, pressing her face against the bedsheets beneath her, not caring if she got them dirty. The intimate view of her private areas made her cheeks flame far hotter than standing in the corner. When his fingers delved between her nether lips, they came away wet, making her moan in both arousal and humiliation. "However, I am aware of

my culpability in tonight's events. I should have realized you would not abide so meekly and taken precautions. Next time, I will remember."

"Then next time, you might not learn as much if you leave me out," she snapped, irked despite her arousal.

Elijah pressed his wet fingers to her anus, and Josie jerked, whimpering. The touch set her senses aflame, even as she tried to squirm away from the rude intrusion.

"I will take that into consideration as well," her husband said, surprising her. His finger dipped slightly into her bottom before pulling away, which also surprised her. A moment later, something else touched her there, about the same size as his finger but harder, and pressed in.

Josie moaned, flexing her hips forward and trying to escape, but there was nowhere to go, especially with Elijah's other hand still pressing on her buttocks, holding the cheeks open. He continued to speak as he pushed the thing into her bottom, making it hard for her to concentrate.

"Next time, we will have a full, considered discussion about your involvement. I will listen to all your reasonings, and you will listen to mine. We will come to an agreement on our best way forward, and you will follow that agreement, or you will pay the price. I will not always allow you to accompany me."

It was surprisingly fair, and she might have felt chuffed at having changed Elijah's mind, but it was not easy to concentrate on anything other than the thing taking up uncomfortable residence in her rear. The slight burn of being stretched was not terrible, but it was not comfortable, either. She could not focus when she was being so perversely defiled, especially since she found it so arousing.

"Good girl." The accolade warmed her, and her bottom clenched. She gasped. The burn from being stretched seemed to have increased, especially when her muscles tightened around whatever he'd inserted.

“What.... Elijah! What is that? It’s burning!” She jerked, trying to reach for herself, even though she should know better by now. He caught her wrists easily, pinning her before her fingers got anywhere near the thing in her bottom. The itchy, stinging burn made her squirm as it grew hotter and hotter, and she bucked. Squeezing to push it out only made the heat increase, and she cried out.

“The ginger will not harm you, but it will hurt worse if you squeeze it,” he told her, a little too late to do her any good. Josie tried to relax, panting for breath.

“It huuuurts.” It did hurt, but she was not unaware of its other effect, especially when Elijah had no reaction to her whining. Arousal swirled through her, as hot as the ginger, making her muscles tremble.

“I know, sweetheart.” The words were said without sympathy. If anything, he sounded pleased, his voice thick with lust, which heated her even more. Why did she like such wicked things? She did not understand and could not explain it, but her body reacted in a completely perverse manner, contrary to what she would have liked to believe about herself.

Elijah’s hands rolled her to her back, deftly maneuvering her hands, so he ended up holding her wrists above her. Whimpering and writhing as her bottom clenched around the ginger, Josie gasped as she was laid onto her back. Whipping off his cravat, Elijah wrapped it around her delicate wrists, tying them together while Josie watched with wide eyes.

END

Elijah

Having Josie at his mercy like this—his to pleasure, his to punish, his to torment and tease—made his cock achingly hard. Her face was flushed bright pink, and her blue eyes were glassy from her need. He could not help but bend over her, pushing her

hands above her head, to claim her mouth for a kiss.

Her lips parted beneath his, and she moaned, hips jerking upward, and he knew she must have inadvertently clenched around the ginger again. One hand holding her bound wrists down, he enjoyed her helplessness as the other slid up her shirt to her breasts, pulling down the bindings she had wrapped around them to hide her generous curves. It was a crime to have flattened them so.

Fingers caressed, plumped, then he pinched her nipple while Josie moaned and writhed beneath him. With her legs draped over the bed, he knew the ginger would be securely locked inside her, and he had left a large enough bulb at the base to keep it from entering her completely. The tormenting burn was clearly driving her wild.

Releasing her lips, he lifted her shirt so he could fall upon her breasts with hands and lips, suckling and nipping, squeezing, pinching, and taking his fill. Josie gasped, bucking beneath him as best she could, which was not very well at all. Her bound hands came down to drape over his neck, and Elijah decided it was time to tie her to his bed, the way he'd imagined doing earlier this evening.

Ignoring her protest as he pulled away, he easily lifted her and changed her position, taking the time to tie her wrists to the headboard. With her trousers still around her thighs, the shirt lifted to reveal her creamy breasts and pink nipples, and dirt smudged across her pretty face, she looked incongruous against the pristine sheets and carved wood. Her face was even more flushed than it had been.

"Elijah... please... I can't... You have to take it out..." She squirmed again, her legs rubbing together, and he grinned down at her, showing his pleasure in her erotic torment.

"Eventually." He leaned over, reaching for the clips he'd left on the end of the bed. "Let me distract you."

Josie stared at him, pink lips parted, worry in her expression—

that combination of fear, lust, and anticipation he so delighted in seeing on a woman's face, and seeing it in Josie's was even more satisfying.

The little clips were two prongs with a small metal loop around them, which could be pushed up to close them. Straddling Josie's waist to help hold her down, Elijah pinched one pert nipple to an even stiffer bud.

"What is that?" Curiosity, dread, need... she was beyond hiding anything from him, and Elijah reveled in the openness of her emotions.

"This..." He placed the clip, so there was a prong on either side of her nipple, and pushed the little circle toward the bud, effectively pinching it between the prongs and tightening the grip as the tiny metal circle came closer and closer. "Will help distract you from the ginger, darling."

Josie

The gleaming silver of the tweezer-like contraption pinching her nipple stood out starkly against her skin like depraved jewelry. The closer the little circle moved to her nipple, the more it pinched, the more it hurt. The burn was different from the ginger's, less sharp and more of a throbbing pinch, but it was growing quickly.

When Elijah quickly did the same to her other nipple, leaving each proud bud staunchly gripped by the silver prongs squeezing them, Josie closed her eyes, struggling to assimilate the erotic chaos of sensations.

Exquisite agony.

Rapturous torment.

She was lost to the sensations at the hand of a master. That was what he was, and she realized it. Elijah's wicked experience far exceeded her own imagination, leaving her more than physically helpless. She could not possibly guess what he was going to do next, and the realization was as thrilling as it was daunting.

When Elijah flipped her onto her knees, her breasts hanging beneath her, nipples still tightly pinched, she was almost relieved when his hand came crashing down on her bottom. This, at least, was something she was used to.

The stinging swats hurt, but they were almost comforting in their familiarity—at least until she clenched her muscles against a swat, and the ginger's sting reasserted itself more strongly.

“Elijah! Please!”

Smack! Smack! Smack!

Josie cried out, bucking, which made her breasts jiggle and the prongs on her nipples tug on the tender buds with her movements. She was afire, inside and out, and every move Elijah made seemed calculated to feed the flames. The effect was devastating. She was utterly mastered and entirely at his mercy, helpless and aroused, contrite and provoked, and completely overwhelmed. Tears slid down her cheeks into the pillow, but she could not have said whether it was from pain, sexual frustration, or the intense combination of sensations afflicting her.

There was no better demonstration of Elijah's control over her than how he played her body as though it were an instrument and he a concert pianist.

Elijah

The combination of watching Josie's bottom go from pink to red, hearing her cries, watching her squirm, and seeing her creamy arousal coating her cunt lips and upper thighs, was the ultimate aphrodisiac. Granted, the short rest between the carriage and now, his hand was sufficiently recovered to give her a judicious spanking, covering every inch of her delectable bottom.

The cheeks jiggled, the end of the ginger finger bobbing between them every time she clenched and released. Beneath her pink cheeks, her pussy lips were pink and swollen, begging for attention. Every time his hand crashed down, she gasped and cried, then lifted her hips up, pushing her rear at him, her body begging him for more.

His cock pulsed, insistent in its need to be buried inside her.

Elijah paused in the spanking, running his hand over her hot red skin while considering his options.

Her pussy was hot and wet, eager, and waiting for him. The brown ginger peeked from between her bottom cheeks, but it would not stretch her out much. The finger was not so thick to truly loosen her tight entrance.

It was the pants that decided him.

So, she wanted to dress as a man? Then Elijah would roger her like one. A cock in the bottom was a surefire way to bring out a woman's submissive nature, and it would ensure the next time he and Josie discussed her involvement in dangerous matters, she would remember the consequences of going off on her own.

While Elijah had meant he would listen to and carefully consider her arguments, he was determined she would not have her way all the time. When she did, he wanted to ensure she acted with circumspection.

Another few swats scattered across her bottom left her writhing and crying out. Elijah pulled away to disrobe and smear oil from the bottle over his cock. The thick stalk ached, throbbing against his palm as he prepared to claim his bride's most forbidden entrance.

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Josie

The maelstrom was dragging her under, leaving her spent and breathless against the pillows. She was so far gone, she could not even tell if the spanking hurt anymore. The flames of her arousal licked through her, confusing her senses and leaving her lost in a sea of hot need, pained ecstasy, and throbbing hunger. She was a tightly wound coil, ready to snap, yet unable to reach the final twist that would snap the tension and send her soaring.

It took a long moment for her to realize the spanking had stopped, and only because the bed shifted beneath her, and Elijah

was climbing on behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, dazed, and realized he had taken off his clothes. How? When had that happened?

Not that it mattered. All that mattered was the need pulsing inside her, the aching emptiness demanding to be filled.

Fingers probed between her hot cheeks, pulling the ginger out. She would have moaned in relief, but at some point, its presence had ceased to matter. Because it had already spent its full effect? Because the combination of the spanking and the pinch of her nipples between the prongs had overpowered it? There was no way to know.

Dropping her head, Josie pushed her hips up, silently begging Elijah to fill her, to fuck her, to ride her into the hot rapture her body so craved.

Instead, his cock pressed against the space the ginger had just vacated.

Her mind went blank.

Her body froze.

Elijah pushed in, slowly but firmly, stretching her far wider than the ginger.

With a shriek, she tried to dive away from the unnatural invasion, but his hands gripped her hips, holding her in place. She jerked on her bound wrists, wildly trying to pull them free, to no avail. There was nothing she could do—she was bound, bent over, and utterly at his mercy... and he was putting his cock in her arse.

Hot need pulsed wildly, simmering her blood. Josie cried out with despair at her body's betrayal as Elijah's slick cock sank deeper inside her rear entrance, stretching her open. The burn was far more acute than the ginger's sting, a cramping, humbling sensation that affected her more than physically.

"Please... Elijah... it's too much!" More tears fell from her eyes as he thrust in deeper, filling her in a manner that was painfully intimate.

"Shhh..." His fingers caressed, thumbs stroking the back of her

hips soothingly. “You have seen the men at the Society. You chose to dress as one tonight, so you shall be treated as one.”

Josie shuddered. Panted. Clenched. All the while, Elijah’s cock slid deeper inside her forbidden channel. The hole some of the men at the Society of Sin used with each other. If this was what wearing breeches got her...

Then you will probably do it again, you tart.

If only she could deny the little voice, but deep down, she knew it was true. Even as she begged, as her body tried to bear down and push the intruder out, there was a part of her loved every second of this wicked act. Loved the invasion, loved the burning sting, the way he forced open her body for his pleasure, the very helplessness that left her defenseless against him.

She craved the penultimate climax, and her passion was growing with every violation, her climax hovering just out of reach.

“Take it, Josie... take my cock up your sweet arse for me. I know it hurts, but I want you to take it for me, anyway.”

If words could melt her into a puddle of lust, Elijah’s would have. His cock thrust deeper, his groin finally settling against her hot cheeks, but the stab of pain aroused her even more. She was taking it for him. Taking the whole punishment to please him. To pleasure him.

When he pulled out, she cried out again at the odd sensation of him receding inside her. She was even more sensitive to the movement, her fingers scrabbling for purchase. It felt as if she was being dragged along with him... then he thrust in again, more smoothly this time, and she was full again.

“Oh, please! Elijah!” She threw her head back as he rode her with long, slow strokes, causing chaos within her body.

The sensations were too new, too odd, to give her the satisfaction her body was clamoring for, yet each thrust sent her arousal soaring. She gripped the sheets beneath her bound hands, her toes curling as the strange sensations rippled through her in

spasms.

It felt different from every time before and yet similar. Her pussy ached, clenching emptily, but with every stroke of his cock, he pressed against something inside her that made her body hum and buzz, pushing her closer to orgasm.

Elijah's fingers moved, sliding over her hip and down between her legs to stroke her aching pussy. Josie screamed at the shocking sensation of his touch where she needed it most, pushing her to a climax while he fucked her arse.

It was depraved, punishment and pleasure combined, and so utterly delicious. She was his—completely. Every part of her had been thoroughly dominated by him, claimed and conquered.

She splintered apart at his touch.

Her back arched as he rubbed, her orgasm overpowering her senses, leaving her bucking beneath him, driving her hips back against his thrusting cock. It hurt deliciously, the pleasure increasing because of the pain it had to overcome, and the climax felt fuller, more all-encompassing, than any from before.

Josie collapsed, and his body drove hers into the bed. Her pinched nipples pressed against the mattress, trapped under her body, the compression making her scream again as another climax wracked her. *La petite mort*, the little death—true to its name, darkness took her as she heard Elijah groan as he buried himself deep, his cock throbbing as he filled her bowels.

Elijah

On the heels of utter bliss, there was a small moment of panic when he realized Josie had fainted, but he calmed quickly. Such an occurrence was not common within the Society, but it was not unknown. Once he saw she was breathing evenly and easily, he relaxed.

By the time he had unclipped Josie's rosy nipples, cleaned her

with several damp cloths—since the dirt she'd added to her person required more than one—and unbound her wrists, Josie was softly snoring. Elijah's lips twitched.

This time, as he curled up in bed beside her, pulling her into his arms, he did not care what gossip it might bring. Somehow, he would protect her. For now, he wanted her here in his arms, where he could feel every breath she took and knew she was safe.

The next morning, when she sleepily snuggled into him, he rolled her onto her back and thrust between her willing thighs, riding both of them to climax before breaking their fast.

Josie

Sore all over, inside and out, Josie stared at her husband across the table. He looked utterly normal, reading his paper, making the occasional comment to his brothers or his father, as if they had not had life-altering relations in his bed last night.

Perhaps for him, it had not been life-altering...

For Josie... she had never imagined giving up so much control to a man, but as she sat gingerly on her chair, she kept sneaking glances at Elijah, hoping for his approval, and when he met her gaze and smiled, she felt warm all over.

Part of her was shrieking she was a ninny for allowing him to do all those awful things to her, but another part of her knew as soon as she was fully recovered, she was wont to get him to do them again—even putting his cock in her bottom. It had been awful and wonderful at the same time. This morning, he'd taken her the usual way, his hands gripping her sore bottom, chest hairs abrading her sore nipples, and she had exploded in climax.

Now, it was impossible to look at him without feeling the aches throughout her body. Blasted man. Yet she had never felt so happy and satisfied, albeit annoyed it would be days before she was comfortable riding a horse. At least they were in London, not the country, so it was not such a great loss.

As if he could hear her thoughts, Elijah lifted his gaze, and Josie blushed.

The next few days passed peaceably, though she could sense Elijah's tension as no new information about the traitor came in. Jacques had hardly been a font of information. Unfortunately, investigations took time, and Josie was not a very patient person.

Three mornings after they had met Jacques, a letter arrived for Uncle Oliver at breakfast. Sitting at the head of the table, as he always did, he sat up straighter when he saw the handwriting on the outside of the letter, drawing Josie's attention and curiosity.

"Father?" Adam's attention had also been drawn, and Elijah and Joseph looked up from their own plates as well.

"It's from Evie," Uncle Oliver said, breaking the seal. No other words could have grabbed all of their attention as quickly.

Josie had checked in with Mary and Lily the night before, but neither of them had heard from Evie recently. Things had been at a standstill as they waited for more information, whether from one of Uncle Oliver's operatives or from Evie. She had enjoyed the time with her friends and Elijah, but she also felt itchy, as if something terrible was about to happen. Knowing Evie was well enough to send a letter was a massive relief.

"Dear Uncle Oliver," he read aloud. "Tell Elijah he needs to be more careful—the man he met at the Tramp's Den was murdered. If he would like to verify, he needs to visit St. Bartholomew's immediately."

"Damn." The curse exploded from Elijah's lips as he threw his napkin onto the table beside his mostly empty plate. He caught Josie's startled gaze and grimaced. "My apologies, Josie. Just..." His voice trailed off, and he sighed, shaking his head. Glancing around the room, he got to his feet. "I will go now."

"Now?" Josie could understand why he wanted to verify Evie's information, but why the rush? The men exchanged glances, piquing her ire, and she narrowed her eyes at them. There was something they knew they did not want to tell her. "Why do you

have to go now? Why can he not wait? Surely, they will not bury him so quickly.”

“Not bury, sell.” Elijah corrected, startling the other gentlemen with his candidness. Joseph staunchly disapproved, while Adam and Uncle Oliver were more hesitant. She blinked as she took in Elijah’s statement. “St. Bartholomew’s is known for selling bodies that go unclaimed, and it’s very possible our Frenchman will be sold.”

Her mouth popped open in shock and horror before she managed to recover herself. If she reacted too strongly, Elijah might not tell her about such things in the future.

“They will sell him?” She was proud of how even she kept her voice, as though she was asking after a horse, not a person.

“If we do not get there to claim the body first, yes.” Elijah stepped away from the table, giving them all an apologetic look. “I will go now.”

“Take Joseph with you,” Uncle Oliver said, relieving Josie of the worry Elijah would go out alone, but still...

“I want to come, too.” Josie delicately placed her own napkin down.

“No.” Elijah met her narrowed gaze. “There is no need. There will be nothing you can do there, and considering the man I met the other night was in good health, it is likely he died violently. That is not something you need to see.”

Josie opened her mouth to argue, then closed it again. Joseph, Adam, and Uncle Oliver were staring at her. Elijah had worded his objection carefully, not indicating she could also identify Jacques—and truth be told, he was right. There was no reason for both of them to go. He could identify the man without her.

Since Elijah had taken the time to reasonably lay out his objections, Josie would show him she could be reasonable as well. Besides, giving in now would give her more ammunition later to join him when she was more interested.

“Very well,” she said stiffly, granting him the concession and

giving him a significant look to ensure he noted how cooperative she was being.

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Elijah

“I cannot believe Josie wanted to see this.” Joseph stared down at the battered face. It was Jacques, recognizable despite the beating he’d taken before his death.

The St. Bartholomew’s orderly coughed from his place in the corner, and Elijah elbowed his brother. The orderly was already agog, probably wondering why two members of the *haut ton* showed up out of nowhere to see an unclaimed body. They did not need to fuel his curiosity.

“She did not want to see this,” Elijah muttered. “She did not want to be left out. There is a difference.” Joseph snorted but did not argue.

Jacques’ death had been hard. He had been beaten and eventually strangled, then his tongue had been cut out. One could only presume his talking to Elijah had been discovered and punished, especially since he had divulged information he was not supposed to have disclosed.

Or maybe just talking to Elijah had been enough?

Then why had he been given a story to tell if someone came asking questions?

Frustrated, Elijah stared at the corpse and wished he could ask Jacques a few more questions, wondering if the man had information he’d held back.

However, there was nothing more for them here.

“Come on.” Although he felt a small pang of conscience leaving the man there on the slab, it was enough he stopped by the orderly. He arranged to pay for a proper burial for Jacques rather than allowing him to be sold to the anatomists or end up in a pauper’s grave. The man had been helping a villain, but he had not

seemed dangerous on his own. He had unknowingly gotten mixed up in the wrong business and paid dearly for it.

“Now what?” Joseph asked, trotting at Elijah’s heels, his brow furrowed. “That’s another lead dead. Somehow, this villain always knows our moves.”

“Yes.” They had a leak somewhere. “I need to talk to Mitchell.”

He had already directed Mitchell to look into the men Jacques had recently gambled with, hoping they could backtrace the steps to the person to who he’d owed his debt. Elijah did not have any other avenues to investigate at the moment. Now, he could have Mitchell ask around about Jacques’ death as well. As much as he wished he could do so directly, the kinds of men who would have the answers he sought would answer Mitchell far more readily than they would him. He might send Adam around as well.

This was one of those instances where his upright reputation worked against him.

Unless he went disguised, but his mind balked. He foresaw a fight with Josie and was not sure he had enough arguments martialled to keep her out of things. Besides, if there was someone on the inside, going out in disguise would be even more dangerous than going out as himself.

Thugs who would hesitate to attack a member of the nobility would think nothing of attacking someone dressed like one of them. Though Anthony and Nathan would be up for accompanying him, he was better off in the ballrooms, where both the French and Russian delegations were. He had spent too much time trying to trace threads among the villain’s henchmen rather than searching for him directly.

“Do you think this will impact the wedding?” Joseph was hesitant about asking, but Elijah did not judge him. Though they were hunting a traitor, which was of utmost importance, it was so people could live peaceably, get married, and have children without having to worry about their futures. Which made the wedding just as important in its own way.

They were securing futures worth fighting for.

Joseph and Miss Bliss' wedding wouldn't be in London. They had eschewed having a wedding during the Season in favor of having it at Camden Hall three weeks after the Season proper was over. According to Joseph, Miss Bliss had been perfectly happy to go along with his suggestion, which had been made out of love for his home and for safety concerns. They had better control over everything at Camden Hall.

"No. Thankfully, you chose to have a small wedding. Well, for a ton wedding." Elijah grinned. Most of the guests would be their neighbors. As a second son, Society did not have the same rabid interest in Joseph's wedding as they had Elijah's, especially since Elijah was married and—they would assume—well on his way to producing an heir.

His grin fading, Elijah shook his head. That was another consideration to keep in mind since Josie insisted on thrusting herself into danger. Though if she was in a delicate condition, she would have more care for herself. Something he would have to ponder more fully at a later date.

Elijah

The evening festivities in Vauxhall Gardens were in full swing when Elijah finally spotted Mitchell. Josie was with Lily and Mary, the three of them happily listening to a violin quartet playing on one of the small pavilions. His wife was in her element, eyes shining with appreciation for the music. Her dark blue gown twinkling with tiny gemstones, she resembled a night goddess, enjoying the pleasure garden. Rex stood close by the trio, watching over them with an eye on how much punch they were imbibing and the various rakes who eyed them with interest, while Elijah prowled through the crowd, waiting for his contact.

The fireworks would begin soon, which would make talking even more difficult. Why Mitchell had wanted to meet here of all places, he did not know, but as it fitted nicely into Josie's plans for the evening—and allowed him to bring her along without putting her in any danger—Elijah had not argued.

He had kept one eye on Josie and the ladies and one eye looking for Mitchell until the man finally arrived. Making his way through the crowd, Elijah positioned himself by Mitchell's side, backs against the balustrade, where he could see everything.

"Any news?"

"Of a sort." Mitchell shrugged. "There does not seem to be any

connection between Jacques and the Russians I can find. Even his story of losing a wager has been impossible to verify. No Russians have been spotted in any of the gaming hells since the delegation arrived.”

Which may or may not mean anything since there were private games they might not be privy to. Since Jacques had referenced a ‘large’ bet, it was entirely possible he had gotten in over his head at such a table, but Elijah did not have time to point that out. Mitchell was already rushing forward with his own theories.

“I think he was trying to divert your suspicions from his countrymen. Everything I have found points to the French, including Jacques.”

“Then why kill him?” Elijah pointed out, and Mitchell’s expression turned stubborn. “Besides, Father received a report from Lucas this morning. There is no sign among the French to indicate anyone there wants the trade negotiations to fail. If anything, they have unswerving and total support.” For a while, he thought there would be some influential figure in France who had something to lose, but Lucas had reported otherwise.

“Then perhaps we should not trust everything Lucas says,” Mitchell retorted darkly, his expression twisting. “For all we know, he is lying through his teeth. I do not understand why your father thought he would be an adequate operative.”

“He was shot and could have been killed. I think we can be sure he is not the traitor,” Elijah’s said dryly. His gaze skittered across the crowd back to Josie. The violins had finished, and the three women were turning away. Her head lifted, eyes searching, then her gaze met his, and she smiled. Seeing his companion, her smile only dimmed a little, but she nodded her head and looked away to say something to Mary.

He had not argued her presence, but there had been no point in having her be part of his meeting with Mitchell. Elijah knew the other man would not have welcomed her input.

“He could have done so in order to gain your trust and cast

suspicion away from himself.” Mitchell’s paranoia was in full force this evening. “Even assuming he was inculpable, he is also a drunk and a gambler. He already reached *point non-plus* once. For that alone, we cannot trust he is actually doing his job.”

Elijah trusted Lucas was dedicated to making amends for his behavior earlier in the Season, including inadvertently becoming part of Mary’s kidnapping. He was also flush with funds thanks to his work, and he seemed eager to continue earning it. His reports had been clear, concise, and entirely sober. It was not worth arguing with Mitchell, and ultimately, the man’s opinion of Lucas did not matter.

The important thing was Mitchell had found nothing useful.

000

Josie

“I do not like that man,” Josie muttered, turning away from watching Elijah talk to Mitchell. As usual, Mitchell was well-dressed, perfectly presentable, and handsome, and some ladies were eyeing both him and Elijah. She had to stifle the urge to warn them all away.

“You are far from alone,” Rex responded. She had not meant for him to hear, but apparently, he had sharp ears. “I have given Elijah my opinion of Mitchell more than once.”

“Mmm, something smells delicious,” Mary said, ignoring their conversation and going up on her tiptoes to see through the crowd. As the most petite in their group, her efforts were useless. Even on her toes, she was barely taller than Josie’s shoulder. “Is anyone else hungry?”

“We should go to our box if we are going to eat.” Rex put his hand on his wife’s back to guide her toward the box they had rented for the evening. Though he was touching Mary, his gaze remained on Lily and Josie, giving them no opportunity to slip away, even if they had wanted to. Neither he nor Elijah had been

thrilled about the outing this evening.

Vauxhall was rowdy enough on a usual night. As the Season came closer to its end the energy was even more frenetic. The gardens were packed with nobles, gentry, and wealthy businessmen. Josie, Mary, and Lily were not the only ladies, but there were very few other debutantes other than Lily. Josie was sure some of the other ‘ladies’ roaming the walkways were actually very expensive ladybirds but did not point them out.

Even as a married lady, she was not supposed to know about or acknowledge such things. She was determined to be proper since Elijah had let her come along tonight. Truthfully, Josie had not wanted to all that badly since she had known he would have to talk to Mitchell alone, but Vauxhall Gardens was far safer than the Warrens, and she had wanted to see if Elijah would be reasonable.

Thankfully, for both of them, he had been. Otherwise, he would have had a fight on his hands.

Walking between Mary and Lily, Josie’s gaze skipped through the crowd, enjoying the various displays of fashion and fripperies, taking mental notes for her own wardrobe. She was not expecting to see anything pertinent to Elijah’s mission, which was why when she met the dark, menacing gaze of the man who had assaulted her mere weeks ago, she actually uttered a little shriek.

“What?” Lily was immediately alert, looking to where Josie was, but as she had never seen Josie’s attacker, she was casting her gaze about blindly. The man had already turned away once Josie had seen him. “What is it?”

“Him! It was him!” Josie took a deep breath, realizing she was not making sense. She was shaking in reaction, though she could not put a name to the emotion—there were too many of them, confusing her. “The man who attacked me, he is here!”

“Where?” Rex’s deep growl cut through.

“There!” Josie pointed, but the man had already disappeared down one of the darker paths through the garden. No, not *one* of, he had gone onto *the* Dark Walk, the long path at the edge of the

garden, which no young lady was ever allowed to walk through. Josie, for all her adventurousness, had not ventured near it on previous visits because of its reputation. “We have to tell Elijah!”

“Stay put. I will go.” Rex took off through the crowd. Josie might have felt indignant at his presumption of taking action, but they all knew he was the better choice. He went through the drunken crowd like the lion he was—where Rex moved, people scrambled out of his way. He would make it to Elijah far faster than Josie could, but would it be fast enough?

“We have to go, too.” Her feet did not move her toward Elijah but toward the entrance to the Dark Walk, where her attacker had disappeared.

“Josie!” Mary was aghast. “We cannot go down the Dark Walk!” Despite her words, she was at Josie’s side, moving just as quickly through the crowd. They were not making headway nearly as fast as Rex was toward Elijah, but then, they did not have as far to go.

“Of course, we can. Well, you and I can. Lily should stay behind to preserve her reputation.” Josie glanced to her left, where Lily was looking straight ahead.

Her friend sniffed in derision. “Do not even think to leave me out.”

“We are going to be in so much trouble,” Mary muttered, but her footsteps did not slow. Josie’s bottom tingled in warning, but it did not matter.

Her brain was working hard, trying to figure out what the villain was doing here. He had shown himself to her deliberately, but why?

Not for her. She had never been the target. Elijah was. The blackguard had probably assumed she would go straight for her husband, the man who had rescued her the first time. Pressing her lips together, she picked up her pace, determined to find the miscreant before Rex and Elijah came running.

This was a trap for Elijah—she felt it deep in her bones.

Just like Jacques, the scoundrel would not be expecting her presence. He would expect Elijah to come barreling in. Elijah was the one whose life had been threatened. Elijah was the one in danger now.

Josie was not about to let anyone harm her husband.

Moving faster, her long legs had her half a pace ahead of Lily and Mary as the three of them entered the shadowed path of the Dark Walk.

205

Elijah

The stirring of people caught Elijah's attention. He looked up to see Rex headed straight for him, his expression grim. Immediately, Elijah stepped toward him, nudging a drunken reveler out of his way. The man stumbled onward, completely oblivious.

"What is it?" Fear gripped his chest. "Is Josie all right?"

"She is fine." Rex pulled up close, gripping his arms and leaning in, his words only for Elijah's ears. "She spotted the man who attacked her. He is here."

Here.

Where the crowds were thick, and anyone with the right sum of money could enter.

The fear that gripped him did not abate in the slightest.

"She saw him headed into the Dark Walk." Rex turned, pointing in the direction—just in time for them to see three young ladies entering the notorious pathway. Both of them cursed loudly.

"What the devil?"

"Bloody hell!"

"Where are they going?" Standing behind Elijah, Mitchell sounded as incensed as either of them. "Do they not know their place?"

No. No, they did not, but as usual, Mitchell's condemnation of Josie grated.

“Shut up, Mitchell.” Rex obviously agreed with Elijah’s feelings on the matter.

“Mitchell.” Elijah diverted Mitchell’s glare away from Rex. “Go find my father or Joseph and tell them. If we can cordon off the Dark Walk...” Then maybe they could catch the bastard.

Nodding stiffly, Mitchell took off in a hurry. Joseph and Miss Bliss had peeled off from their group earlier to watch some jugglers, but they should still be about. Miss Bliss had been especially keen to see the fireworks, which would start soon. Father was somewhere around with his friends. Hopefully, Mitchell would find one or both of them, and they could find enough trusted men in the crowd to help cover the exits to the path.

Rex had already started toward the entrance, and Elijah rushed in his wake, easily catching up since Rex had already carved out a path through the revelers. Despite the noise, Elijah could still hear Rex’s grumbles.

“She will not sit comfortably for a week.”

Thinking of his own wife, Elijah wholeheartedly agreed. A week might be too generous, in fact. When he caught up with her...

Well, first, he was going to deal with the villain. *Then* they were clearly going to require another talk about reckless behavior.

Josie

The Dark Walk was deeply shadowed and not well lit, unlike most of Vauxhall's pathways. The sounds were also muted by the shrubs and trees, though that also had something to do with distance as they moved away from the main activities. Instinctively, the three of them bunched together, moving a little slower and more cautiously down the path than how they had entered it.

"Where did he go?" Mary whispered, looking around nervously.

Josie tightened her lips, shaking her head. They had already lost sight of him, and if they reached a point where the path divided...

She hurried her steps, moving ahead of Lily and Mary, who she could hear scrambling to catch up.

There were several nooks and small courtyards along the path, and Josie only glanced into each of them, confirming they were empty before moving on. Behind her, she could hear Mary muttering imprecations at how fast Josie was moving—with her shorter legs, she had to work twice as hard to keep up.

Drawing to a halt before the entrance to the next courtyard, Josie gasped when she looked in.

He was there, the man who had attacked her, standing in the

center of the courtyard next to the sculpture fountain, with gun drawn and a baffled expression.

Before either of them could say anything, Mary slammed into her side, clearly not having expected Josie's abrupt halt.

"Two of you?!" The man cursed, his eyes rolling heavenward. Out of the corner of her eye, Josie saw Lily come to a halt, several feet away from them. She could not see her friend's reaction clearly but saw her stepping back several feet. The hedges gave enough cover, the man did not see her. Shaking his head, he gestured at Josie and Mary. "Come in here."

"I would rather not, thank you," Josie said, but the moment she started speaking, he was already lifting the gun. If it had been only her, she might have tried to run, but she could not risk him shooting into the hedges and hitting Mary or Lily.

"Come. Here." This time, he growled the order.

Mary's hand found hers, and their fingers wrapped around each other. Slowly stepping into the courtyard, they stayed as far away from the man as possible.

"Move over there." He pointed at the far side of the hedges, away from the entrance they had just come through and a possible escape. There was another gap in the hedges behind him, another way into the courtyard without having to push through branches, but that was unreachable to them as well.

"Witless females." He growled again in frustration. "Now, what the devil am I supposed to do?"

The lethal ire in his voice chilled Josie's blood. He had expected Elijah to come running and got her and Mary instead. Mary's fingers gripped hers tighter. His gaze hardened.

"Good thing there are two of you. You." He pointed the gun at Mary. "You are going to go back out there and tell her husband she has been kidnapped, and he is to await further instruction."

"What further instruction?" Mary asked, not moving from Josie's side.

As much as Josie appreciated her friend's bravery, she also

wanted to kick Mary. This was a chance for her to save herself! She needed to take it. The fewer hostages he had, the better. Josie squeezed Mary's fingers tighter, in a grip that should have been painful, but Mary ignored her, acting like a flibbertigibbet, her voice rising higher as if approaching hysterics.

"When will you send it? How will he receive it?"

"He will receive it later when I figure out how to send it, you ninnyhammer. Now, go!" Lifting the gun again, he aimed it directly at her head. "Or I will shoot you and leave you here to deliver the message if someone finds you in time."

Squeaking, Mary released Josie's hand and fled. She was quite the little actress. Josie did not believe for one second Mary was as hysterical as she pretended to be. Frightened, even terrified, yes, but none of them were the types to lose their heads in a dire situation. Acting as he expected might keep them all alive for a little longer. The man tilted his head, clearly listening to Mary's rapidly dwindling footsteps as she hurried away.

Josie stared at him, mind racing. Mary and Lily were safe. She did not want to be kidnapped. Elijah and Rex would be on their way at any moment. All she had to do was stall.

"What are you doing here?" It was the first question that came to mind.

"I'm here to kill your husband."

"No!" She pretended to be shocked, though voicing a denial was certainly no strain on her acting abilities. The very idea this man might succeed in his mission sent pain streaking through her, as well as anger and determination that he fail his mission.

He barked a short laugh, coming toward her with the gun still raised. Josie tried to back away, but she was already pressed against the hedges behind her, and there was nowhere for her to go.

"Shut up, you stupid cunt. No questions. If you scream, I'll kill you with my bare hands." The evil light in his eyes said he meant every word.

Elijah

Rushing down the darkened path, only steps ahead of Rex, they both slowed when they saw a woman in green rushing back toward them. Mary—face pale, eyes wide, running flat out with her skirts hiked up.

“What took you so long?!” The question was shot at them in a whisper as soon as she was close enough. She whirled without waiting for an answer. “This way!”

They would have been able to find it without her, but Mary slowed, holding up her hand before they reached the courtyard, so they could sneak up to it, moving slowly.

“He has a gun,” Mary whispered, and Elijah waved her away. With a stony expression on his face, Rex grabbed hold of his wife and yanked her back behind Elijah.

“You will not get away with this.” Josie’s voice quavered so patently overdramatic, despite the direness of the situation, Elijah almost laughed. It brought back memories of their younger years when she, Mary, Lily, Joseph, Adam, and several of the other neighbors around their age had put on a play Lily had written. If she was playacting, he knew she was no worse for the wear, which reassured him momentarily. Now, it was his job to keep it that way.

“I already have, you silly chit.” The man’s voice was gravelly and full of annoyance. “I will not get to kill your husband now, but you will help me set another trap for him, then I will have the pleasure of killing both of you. Now come along.”

Letting the villain take Josie to another location was out of the question. Elijah stepped forward into the gap between the hedges, aware of Rex pulling Mary back away from him so they could remain obscured by the branches and leaves.

“Oh, really?” he drawled, playing for time, muscles tensed and ready to leap aside. The man turned toward him, gun in his

outstretched hand.

Josie shrieked with outrage beside the villain, turning and grabbing his arms, pushing them up as the gunshot rang out—Elijah had already moved from his position, anticipating such a reaction from the blackguard, though he had *not* foreseen Josie's actions. Putting herself in more danger...

He popped back up in the entrance just in time to see her pop the blackguard in the nose with a strong right hook. If it took Elijah off guard to see it, it took her attacker even more so to be on the receiving end. He spun around blindly, only to come face to face with Lily, who had appeared like an avenging goddess in the back entrance to the courtyard. Her face was slightly scratched, and small twigs dotted her hair and dress, but her expression was grimly determined as she went to work on their villain, effectively downing him with two efficient blows to the head, stunningly beautiful in their execution.

Falling against the base of the fountain, the man was utterly poleaxed. Elijah knew how he felt. Even with Josie's claim, Lily was the superior boxer, he had hardly expected her level of expertise.

His focus turned to his wife, who was panting for breath and rubbing her arm where a hand-shaped bruise was already forming, thanks to the man's hard grip. Hurrying forward, Elijah pulled her into his arms, swinging her away from her assailant. As he did so, he glanced down and was shocked to recognize the man.

"James Magruder."

"Who?" Josie asked, her arms wrapped firmly around his middle as she hugged him.

"That is James Magruder, Cousin to Viscount Rawlings, I believe." This was not the first time they had crossed paths. Elijah knew him because he'd caught Magruder cheating at cards, which had resulted in James being booted from the club in question. He was not considered good *ton*, but his connection to his cousin explained his ability to appear at their events without overmuch

speculation. Elijah very much doubted Magruder was the mastermind behind everything, but with his grudge against Elijah, he made a very good henchman.

Still holding his bleeding nose, Magruder glared at him through rapidly blackening eyes. Josie and Lily had done a number on him.

Elijah smiled down at him menacingly.

“I look forward to having another conversation with you, Magruder.”

Things moved quickly from there. Father appeared with several men to apprehend Magruder. Another time, Elijah would have stood over the man and been part of binding his hands and hustling him out of Vauxhall, but today, his priority was his wife. Josie was unharmed but shaken, as were Mary and Lily.

“We have to get Lily out of here unseen. Does anyone have a cloak?” Josie asked, causing Elijah to give her an exasperated look.

“What?”

“Lily! Look at her!” Josie did not relinquish her grip on Elijah’s middle as she nodded toward her friend. “She’s a debutante on the Dark Walk, and she cannot step out of it looking like that. Her reputation will be ruined.”

Blinking, Elijah realized Josie was right. The marks on Lily’s skin, the twigs adorning her hair, and the tiny rips in her dress were from forcing herself through the hedges so she could sneak up behind Magruder, not knowing her appearance would be credited to far more vile reasoning.

Mary and Rex went to get Lily a cloak while she waited in the courtyard with Father, Elijah, and Josie. The men who had taken custody of Magruder bundled him off in the opposite direction, going deeper into the Dark Walk to go out another exit, farther from the revelers.

Throughout it all, Elijah did not relinquish his tight grip on Josie. The memory of seeing her disappearing onto the Dark Walk, chasing after an unknown villain, would give him nightmares. She was not going to sit comfortably for a month after this if he had

anything to say about it. What the devil had she been thinking?

“That was quick thinking, but also very foolish,” Father said, dabbing at one of the deeper scratches on Lily’s arm with his handkerchief, blotting away the blood.

“Well, I could hardly stand around and do nothing.” Lily shook her head. Other than her disheveled appearance, she was back to looking like a prim and proper debutante, a little more modest than most. As far as appearances being deceiving, Elijah thought she might take the cake. “The man was going to kidnap Josie. I did not want a repeat of Mary’s situation.”

“Be that as it may—” Father’s gentle scolding was cut off when a gunshot ricocheted through the air. “Are the fireworks starting already?” By his tone, he knew, as well as Elijah, that was no firework.

The sound had come from deeper within the Dark Walk.

“Stay here. Guard them.” Father’s orders were terse as he dashed out of the courtyard, heading in the direction Magruder had been taken. Before his marriage, Elijah would have felt left out and chafed at the bit, though he would have understood and done his duty. Now, there was nothing more important than guarding Josie’s safety. Even if his father had wanted to send him to see what was happening, Elijah was not sure he would have gone.

His place was here, by Josie’s side.

Always.

“What was that? Where did Uncle Oliver go?” Mary stepped into the courtyard, followed by Rex, who loomed behind her, looking increasingly anxious.

“Gunshot?” Rex asked, in the tone one of who wanted to be told he was wrong. His expression grew grimmer when Elijah nodded.

“I think so,” Elijah temporized, but he knew it was true. While the fireworks would be going off soon—which Magruder had likely counted on in his plan to murder Elijah—his gut knew it had been a gun.

Mary wrapped the cloak around Lily, and all three ladies had stubborn expressions on their faces Elijah recognized. Fortunately, he was not forced to tell them *no*, they could not investigate because Father was already striding back into the clearing.

“Magruder is dead.” Father was grimly furious. “Shot from someone behind the hedges. They got away.”

Elijah cursed, hugging Josie tighter. Their mastermind was still out there, and now, their only new lead was dead.

Josie

Despite knowing her bottom was in for some stern discipline, Josie felt nothing but relief arriving home with Elijah. Tonight could have gone so differently in so many ways.

She could have been killed.

Mary or Lily could have been killed.

Elijah could have been killed.

Despite her love for her friends, it would have been the last possibility that would devastate her the most.

Instead, they had come had all come through it with nothing worse than bruises and scratches. Her arm still ached where Magruder's fingers had gripped her, but that was hardly worth noting compared to what could have happened.

Elijah seemed to feel the same way. Rather than ordering her immediately to the corner or to present herself for discipline, the moment they were alone, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her fiercely. Devotedly. Josie returned the kiss, clinging to him with all her strength. Celebrating, for lack of a better word, the ability to do so.

It was several long moments before their lips parted, leaving her dizzy and gasping for air as her husband's dark eyes bore into hers.

“What the devil were you thinking, going after Magruder on your own?” He did not relinquish his hold. His arms tightened, trying to press her even closer to him as if afraid she might slip out of his grasp at any moment. Foolish man. There was nowhere she would rather be. She hugged him back even tighter.

“I thought he had set a trap for you and the best way to thwart him was to spring it myself first,” she responded guilelessly. There was no point in hiding her motives from him. Elijah groaned, closing his eyes in sheer disbelief. Josie shrugged and bent her head against his chest, rubbing her cheek against the soft material of his jacket, feeling the steely muscles beneath. It was easier to make her admission when she did not have to look at him. “I am as eager to protect you as you are me. That happens when one is in love.”

Because of how tightly they were pressed together, she felt Elijah’s breath hitch. Felt every minute reaction of his body. The way he stilled, as the impact of her words hit home, the way his fingers caressed in their wake, the feel of his cheek atop her head.

Josie was braced for his questions, his disbelief, ready to defend her statement or even to bear his judgment over her flighty emotions. What she was not ready for was his simple response.

“I love you, minx.”

Pure, unadulterated joy bubbled up inside her. She twisted her head around, forcing his from atop hers so she could kiss him again, this time with a new array of emotions, even stronger than the ones before. Elijah’s lips curved against hers in a happy smile, and she pulled away from the kiss, staring at him.

“You love me?” She did not mean to sound incredulous, but she was.

“Not that it will do you any good in avoiding your just punishments,” Elijah teased, bending his head to press the tip of his nose against hers. “But yes, I love you, Josie. There is no other woman in the world I would rather have as my wife.”

“Even though I am impetuous, reckless, and flighty?”

“All of which gives me a good excuse to turn your bottom red. Like right now.” Josie shrieked with laughter as he spun her around to face the bed, his hands roaming over her, touching every inch of her as they moved. Her own hands pressed down on the mattress as Elijah flipped her skirts up, baring her bottom.

Despite the seriousness of the matter at hand and knowing he would not go lightly on her, she still felt nothing but elation. In some ways, Elijah’s punishments showed his love, a way of showing he cared about her behavior, about her safety. Her willing reception of them showed hers—she would consent to his discipline, ceding to his domination over her, in a manner they would both ultimately enjoy.

The spankings would hurt, but the gratification of making up afterward overcame any lingering pain. If she was honest, she did not entirely dislike the spankings.

Elijah

Bringing his hand down on his wife’s pert bottom, seeing the color bloom on her creamy skin, a combination of relief and happiness swept over Elijah. Both of them were still here, unharmed and able-bodied. The utter exhilaration he felt at Josie’s admission of love, returning it with his own, was making him want to be far softer on her than he knew he should.

Then again, he did not want to harm her. Perhaps her punishment should be spread out over the next month, doled out on a weekly basis. The thought made him grin. Being spanked on a weekly basis should also have the salutary effect of keeping her in line in other matters, not wanting to risk adding to her punishment.

Or perhaps not. Elijah was becoming accustomed to the idea he would not always be able to predict, much less direct, his wife’s behavior.

However, there were some things he could make clear enough.

“You will not go off chasing any more villains by yourself.”

Smack! Smack! Smack!

“You will wait for me next time.”

Smack! Smack! Smack!

“But he might have gotten away!” Josie protested, her pink bottom wiggling as she tried to look over her shoulder to meet Elijah’s gaze. He responded by giving her arse a hefty swat across the center of her bottom. Shrieking, she bounced and jiggled.

“Which would have been preferable to putting yourself in danger,” Elijah said sternly. “You did recently require I consult with you before hieing off on my own, did you not? Yet today, you did exactly that.”

The silence that met his point made it clear she did not have an argument. Reminding her of her infractions also made it easier to push his joy aside in favor of becoming a sterner disciplinarian.

He spanked her harder, eliciting little yelps from her as her feet danced. She bounced on her toes, digging her fingers into the covers on their bed to keep from trying to reach back and cover her bottom, which was turning a nice shade of pink.

As punishing her bottom had not had a lingering effect, Elijah branched out a little. His next swat, though not as hard, fell between her thighs, right on the swollen lips of her pussy. Josie shrieked, back arching, and he could see the effort it took her not to release the coverlet. It was also no surprise when his fingers came away wet.

He and Josie were perfectly matched in every way.

Josie

Ow, ow, ow!

Another sharp, stinging swat landed on her pussy, and Josie shrieked again. Elijah was marginally gentler when he spanked her

there, yet it hurt twice as much as her bottom did! That or she was getting far too used to the feeling of having her bottom spanked.

Each slap against her tender folds made her jerk and cry out, the sensitive flesh swelling against the assault. Conversely, her need soared higher every time Elijah's hand landed. It burned painfully yet pleurably, and when the tips of his fingers snapped against the swollen bud of her clitoris, she thought she might actually combust.

As if sensing that she was close to her peak, Elijah pulled back, leaving her simmering, shuddering, and oh-so-very needy.

"Five with the belt. For today." His stern voice made her insides flip. "Next week will be more of the same, and for the next two weeks until your punishment is completed."

Josie whimpered, her bottom clenching at the idea of being spanked—belted—for four weeks in a row. Yet she could not find it within herself to argue against the severity of the punishment. She had known she was thrusting herself into danger, taking the action she would have severely upbraided Elijah for. She knew it was luck, inasmuch as anything else, that got them through the day, hale and hearty.

As admirable as her motivations had been, she could have stopped to think before springing into action. Perhaps next time, she would even do so if it would get her out of a more egregious punishment.

The first lick of fire across her bottom made her scream.

The belt was far more painful than his hand or even the ginger.

Yes, she would definitely take more time to think before leaping to action next time.

She did not protest when Elijah laid down a second welt, just beneath the first, searing her senses with the fiery discipline. Tears rolled down her face, and she bit her lip against begging him to stop. Part of her needed this, even craved it. The pain was her absolution, her apology for the fear he had felt when she had gone after Magruder without him. She saw how white-faced he'd been

when he finally caught up, felt his terror, and she truly was sorry for putting him through that.

By the time the fifth blow landed on the sensitive backs of her thighs, Josie was sobbing. It burned... it burned like a thousand suns... yet when Elijah rolled her onto her back, pulling her against him, his cock seeking comfort between her thighs, she was soaking wet with arousal. Her lips met his hungrily, pulling him against her even as she cried out at the shocking sensation of being filled with one thrust as her sore bottom pressed against the mattress.

Their joining was rushed. Frantic. Fueled by lingering reactions to fear as much as their own ardor. A confirmation of life.

When their breathing slowed, so did Elijah's touches. He stripped her down, and she returned the favor, kissing every inch of each other as they went, stoking the fires of their passion. The skin of her bottom still burned, especially when he gripped it, but the pain had transmuted into something far more pleasurable.

They moaned in unison, moving together as the glory of their love flowed over and through them. Josie looked up at the man moving above her, in her, and knew she had finally found the love she had always sought, the happiness she'd yearned for, and saw him looking at her the same way. He bent his head, claiming her lips yet again, thrusting strongly between her thighs as the need riding them crescendoed and peaked.

Josie cried out against his lips, her fingers digging into his shoulders, legs clutching him closer to her. His cock thrust deep, sliding through their combined wetness and filling her completely.

Wrapped in a tangle of limbs, her bottom and between her legs throbbing for two entirely different reasons, Josie nuzzled Elijah's shoulder with her nose.

"I am sorry for rushing off the way I did. I should have stopped and waited to speak with you."

His arm around her tightened, and his lips brush the top of her head.

“You have no idea how glad I am to hear that.”

Squirming around, Josie got into a position where she could look Elijah in the eyes.

“Trust me, I may be impetuous at times, but there is nothing I want more than to spend every night safe in your arms.”

Elijah grinned at her. His open expression would have shocked most of his acquaintances since he normally did not lower his barriers. Josie luxuriated in the intimacy and love emanating from him.

“Trust me, minx, I will do everything I can to assure that outcome.”

“I love you, Elijah.” Tears stung her eyes at the emotions that surged inside her, filling her with such joy that she could barely contain it. She was so, so grateful she had married the wrong Stuart brother.

“I love you, Josie. My little minx.”

There was still a traitor to uncover and catch, a Season to finish, but for now, Josie was—perhaps for the first time—perfectly content with her life.

Epilogue

Lily

Staring out the window at the rolling greenery outside of London, Lily heaved a sigh of relief. Across the barouche-landau, on the opposite bench, her maid looked up at her with an inquisitive brow before deciding Lily had not actually been trying to catch her attention and looked away again. Thankfully, Chastity was used to Lily's preference for quiet reflection over constant chattering.

The lady's maid had been a gift from the Duchess of Frederick, Lily's godmother, during the Season, but they had rubbed along well, so Lily had asked if Chastity would extend her employment and accompany her to the country. It was a special boon because Lily had left for Derbyshire several days before her parents, permissible only because she had her lady's maid to travel with her as an erstwhile chaperone. As there was no need to spend the night at an inn, she did not need a more formidable one.

Sighing happily again, Lily leaned back against her bench seat, inwardly smiling when Chastity ignored her this time. Several years older, Chastity's sober demeanor was a good match for Lily's quiet, bookish ways.

If she never had to go to London for the Season again, she would be perfectly happy. The only reason she had done so was

her friend Evie had asked her and her other two best friends. Josie had thrived on her first foray into Society, and Mary had deftly dealt with her second Season, but Lily had hated every moment.

Gentlemen, she had discovered, did not like a woman with their own mind. At least, not the nincompoops she had been introduced to. Several had been drawn in by her relationship with the Duke and Duchess of Frederick, but they had not stayed after realizing Lily was the type to speak her mind. Which was a relief, even if it was lowering. She had always imagined marrying and having children, but if that was what London had to offer...

Unfortunately, the options in Derbyshire were not much better. Perhaps she would become an aged bluestocking spinster, firmly on the shelf, playing doting auntie to her friends' children. After her first Season, Lily found the prospect far more appealing than she would have countenanced at the beginning.

Granted, she had not gone into the Season with high hopes, knowing well she was not what many considered 'sociable,' but whatever hopes she'd had were quickly crushed underfoot by the general attitudes of the *ton*. Her very first week out in Society, she'd heard the incredibly handsome Lord Broderick—with who she'd thought she'd had a very interesting conversation—remark to one of his friends that the only way she would find a husband would be to sew her mouth shut.

After that, to gauge the gentlemen's reactions, Lily had become even more outspoken about her views and opinions. Like Lord Broderick, they were polite enough to her face, but she saw through their facades and overheard some of their comments, enough to know those gentlemen were assuredly *not* for her.

The carriage came to a sudden, jerking stop, tumbling the occupants about. Chastity cried out, flinging her arms wide as she was thrown forward, and Lily opened hers to catch her. They fell back against Lily's bench, shocked by the abrupt halt.

"Stand and deliver!"

What? A highwayman? Lily and Chastity exchanged

disbelieving looks before Lily quickly released her maid and knowing she was being a perfect twit, leaned out the window to see a man on horseback, wearing a long black cape and mask, pointing a gun at the carriage.

Botheration. This was the last thing she needed today.

✂

I hope you enjoyed Josie & Elijah's story... Lily and Captain Nathan Jones face off next in A Season for Smugglers! [CLICK HERE](#) to preorder and make sure you don't miss out.

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Acknowledgments

Thank you so much to my beta readers, Candida, Marie, Annie, Karen, Marta, Katherine, and Sir Nick for your encouragement and tolerance of my many questions and need for reassurance throughout the writing process. The books are always better in the end thanks to your input.

A huge thank you to my husband, for all the love and support as I continue on this writing journey. I couldn't do this without you.

And thank you, dear readers, for continuing to read and leave reviews! Seeing how my books touch others makes my heart so very happy.

About the Author

Golden Angel is a *USA Today* best-selling author and self-described bibliophile with a "kinky" bent who loves to write stories for the characters in her head. If she didn't get them out, she's pretty sure she'd go just a little crazy.

She is happily married, old enough to know better but still too young to care, and a big fan of happily-ever-afters, strong heroes and heroines, and sizzling chemistry.

She believes the world is a better place when there's a little magic in it.

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